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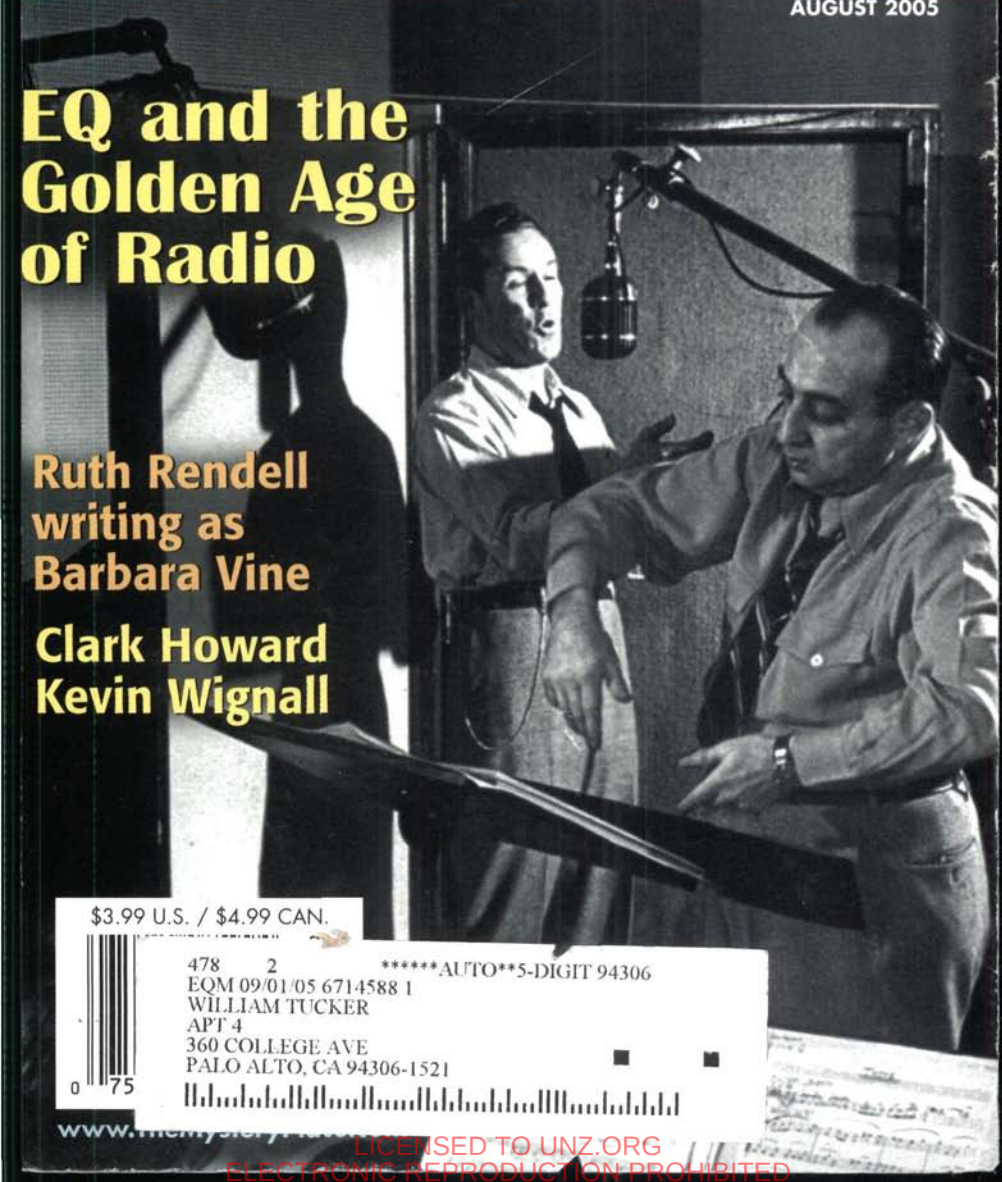

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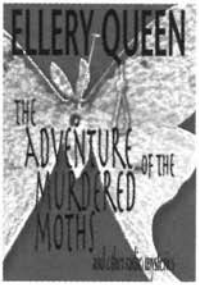

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Ellery Queen was a groundbreaker in radio, and our centenary year would be incomplete without an article on the subject by Francis M. Nevins, coauthor, with Martin Grams, of the book The Sound of Detection: Ellery Queen's Adventures in Radio.

The Ellerys of the Airwaves

by Francis M. Nevins

The year was 1938. Detective fiction was in its golden age and followers of the genre could count on anywhere from one to four books a year from John Dickson Carr, Agatha Christie, Erle Stanley Gardner, Rex Stout, and the first cousins Frederic Dannay and Manfred B. Lee, whose series character and joint byline was Ellery Queen. George Zachary (1911–1964), a young executive in the Columbia Broadcasting System's programming department, was toying with the concept of a new kind of radio drama: an hour-long detective series that would invite listeners to match wits with the protagonist and, if they were very smart and very lucky, beat him to the solution of the week's mystery. Unfortunately, Zachary hadn't read much detective fiction and had no clue that Fred and Manny had spent the last nine years writing the kind of novel, complete with 'Challenge to the Reader,' that he envisaged as radio drama. Eventually he discovered Ellery Queen—whether on his own or thanks to a tip from someone else remains a riddle—and made the cousins an offer, which they accepted. This, in a nutshell, was how Ellery became the star of his own weekly series on CBS Radio.

While Fred and Manny were learning the fundamentals of radio writing by working without credit on series like *Alias Jimmy Valentine* and *The Shadow* (devotees still debate which *Shadow* episodes are theirs), Zachary was lining up the actors and support troops who would bring *The Adventures of Ellery Queen* to audible life. For Ellery he picked dulcet-toned Hugh Marlowe (1911–1982); for Inspector Queen the veteran Santos Ortega (1899–1976), whom Manny once described as "one of the most deceptive [voice] doubles I've ever heard"; for Sergeant Velie a long-forgotten actor who was replaced after a few months by gravel-voiced Ted de Corsia (1905–1973). In order to provide the "love interest" that was supposed to attract the female audience, Zachary, with Fred's and Manny's approval, added a new member to the Queen family: Ellery's secretary, Nikki Porter. That part went to Marian Shockley (1908–1981), who married Zachary in October 1939. During the show's first ten weeks, the orchestra performing background music was conducted by Bernard Herrmann (1911–1975), the soon-to-be-legendary composer of scores for movies like *Citizen Kane, Vertigo,* and *Psycho.*

Zachary paralleled the Queen "Challenge to the Reader" device

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by stopping each week's drama after all the clues had been set forth so that a panel of guests who "represented" the listening audience could engage in an unrehearsed debate about whodunit. At first these guest sleuths were drawn from the ranks of New York celebrities—music critic Deems Taylor, playwright Lillian Hellman, photographer Margaret Bourke-White—but most of them turned out to be less than scintillating. One claimed that the murderer was his fellow guest detective, another spent five minutes arguing that the week's culprit must have been Ellery himself. After a few months Zachary decided to replace the big-name guests with ordinary men and women, but they didn't shine either, and the oscillation between celebrity guest sleuths and average-Joes-and-Janes continued throughout the show's life on the air.

Between June 1939 and February 1940, Fred and Manny wrote and Zachary produced and directed 34 hour-long radio dramas that were broadcast Sunday evenings on CBS. In the debut episode, "The Gum-Chewing Millionaire" (June 8, 1939), a letter from a complete stranger asking Ellery to recommend a nurse involves him in the murder of a crippled, gum-chewing, will-changing old tyrant. In the following week's drama, "The Last Man Club" (June 15, 1939), Ellery and Nikki witness a hit-and-run and are caught up by the victim's dying words into the affairs of a survivor-take-all group to which the dead man belonged. The clues are neat and subtle and Ellery's solution is a model of fair play with the audience. As all good Queenians know, misleading dying messages and death-plagued tontines soon became staple items in the Queen canon both on radio and in print.

"The Mother Goose Murders" (October 8, 1939), in which Ellery visits an old hotel to investigate a series of killings with nursery-rhyme motifs, may inadvertently have saved the Queen series from early cancellation. That evening a water hose burst in the transmitter cooling system of WBBM, the CBS affiliate in Chicago, and forced the show off the air nine minutes before the end of the hour. The station was besieged by thousands of angry phone calls from listeners demanding to be told the murderer's identity. When he first heard of this widely reported incident, Fred Dannay believed it was a publicity stunt. But the CBS executive he visited swore it had really happened and, as both men saw at once, it demonstrated more convincingly than any poll that the Queen series was drawing a huge and avid audience. Offers began to come in from potential sponsors.

By early 1940 Fred and Manny had begun to feel the strain of coming up with a 60-minute radio script each week. The Queen series continued at that length only for the first seven weeks of the new year, on two of which reruns were used. On February 25, the program was cut to 30 minutes and moved to an earlier Sunday evening time slot. Two months later the show ceased being a "sustainer" and came under the Gulf Oil Company's sponsorship.

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In "The Man Who Could Double the Size of Diamonds" (May 5, 1940; script printed in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine,* December 1943*) Ellery solves the murder of an eccentric scientist who claims to have discovered a chemical process for growing diamonds and simultaneously untangles the impossible theft of four such stones from a locked and heavily guarded vault. The culprit "devised a theft of such colossal simplicity that I was nearly taken in by the complicated props," Ellery remarks at the summing-up. Those words aptly describe many of Queen's finest novels and stories—and radio scripts, too.

The final episode to be broadcast on CBS and sponsored by Gulf and to star Hugh Marlowe was "The Mark of Cain" (September 22, 1940), in which Ellery, Nikki, Inspector Queen, and Sergeant Velie masquerade as servants in an attempt to prevent murder among an eccentric millionaire's heirs. It had been a grueling fifteen months for Fred, Manny, Zachary and the regular cast. To the end of his life Fred credited Hugh Marlowe with being the best interpreter of the role on radio, but Manny had a different view. In a letter of December 1947 to Anthony Boucher, he called Marlowe "the greatest ham that ever strode the stage clad in imaginary buskins." Marlowe continued acting on the stage and in movies and reprised the role of Ellery fifteen years later in the syndicated TV series *The New Adventures of Ellery Queen* (1955–56). In his golden years he played the patriarch of the principal family in NBC-TV's daytime serial *Another World.* On May 2, 1982, at age 71, he died of a heart attack in his Manhattan home.

The fifteen months Ellery Queen was off the air proved to be among the most fruitful in the cousins' creative lives, giving birth to *101 Years' Entertainment* (1941), which is the definitive anthology of short mystery fiction between Poe and Pearl Harbor, plus the novel *Calamity Town* (1942), which is one of the finest in the Queen canon, plus *EQMM* itself, whose debut issue hit the stands in the fall of 1941. When all the high-paying national magazines rejected *Calamity Town* for serialization and none of the editors could explain why, Fred and Manny decided that "We'd better find another basket for our eggs. . . . If you can be turned down with no reason apparent on the best book you've ever written . . . then you've got to do something else." The prime candidate for that "something else" was radio. The cousins asked their agent to find them a new network and sponsor and committed themselves to the old grind of a script a week.

The Adventures of Ellery Queen returned in January 1942, one month after Pearl Harbor, broadcast on NBC's Red Network and sponsored by the Emerson Drug Company, makers of Bromo-Seltzer. Santos Ortega, Ted de Corsia, and Marian Shockley returned as Inspector Queen, Sergeant Velie, and Nikki, with the

*and in this issue—see p.14

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role of Ellery taken over by Carleton Young (1907–1971). George Zachary continued to produce (although others took over the director's chair) and of course Fred and Manny were back with scripts that hewed to the 1939–40 pattern. Indeed several were tightened reworkings of 60-minute dramas from the show's earliest months on the air. "A plot every week knocked me out," Fred admitted to me decades later.

In the memories of fans from the 'forties who later became writers, *Ellery Queen* was the finest whodunit on the air. One of those fans was Chris Steinbrunner (1933–1993), whose article "Challenges to the Listener" *(The Armchair Detective,* Summer 1979) conjured up the framework of the program:

> The audio memory machine clicks on. First the commercial, "the one and only talking train" rolling you into the show, hoarse and chugging voice-box locomotives: "Fiiight headache threeee ways! Bromo-Seltzer Bromo-Seltzer Bromo-Seltzer . . ." Then the smooth-voiced announcer . . . introduced you to "the celebrated gentleman detective in person"—Ellery Queen. And Ellery "invited you to match wits with him as he relates another story of a crime he alone unraveled." Then, at the point where he is able to solve the mystery, he stops the play, [and] gives you a chance to solve the mystery.

That point was signaled by Ellery's announcement: "Now, Dad, I know who killed so-and-so." Then he and Nikki would step out of their roles and Nikki would introduce the evening's guest armchair detectives, who tended to be government bureaucrats, media personalities, or people with special knowledge bearing on the plot. Ellery would ask each guest who he or she thought was guilty, the sleuths would propound and defend their solutions, then Ellery would step back into character and explain his own deductions to Nikki and his father and the ever-dumbfounded Sergeant Velie and the audience. Finally the Maestro (as Velie called him) would step outside his role again, congratulate the rare guest who had come up with the right answer, and present all the guests with copies of the latest Queen novel or anthology plus a subscription to *EQMM.* Apparently they got cash, too.

The second episode of the reconfigured Queen series was "Invisible Clue" (January 15, 1942), the script for which was included in Margaret Cuthbert's anthology *Adventures in Radio* (1945). A letter from a terrified man asking Ellery to wake him up at seven o'clock the next morning propels the gentleman detective into the case of the unseen persecutor, which is reminiscent of Chesterton's famous Father Brown story "The Invisible Man" but without religio-philosophic overtones. Ellery solves the puzzle through the invisible (i.e. negative) clue of the title.

In "The Black Syndicate" (April 2, 1942), Ellery is called in when the head of an export firm disappears after his four partners, follow-

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ing his instructions, have liquidated the business and sent him all the proceeds. Manny Lee happened to visit the studio during rehearsals and met a young actress named Kaye Brinker (1915–1991) who had a featured role. They began dating at once and after a whirlwind courtship were married on July 4, 1942. The marriage lasted until Manny's death twenty-nine years later. After the episode broadcast on their wedding day, the Queen series went off the air for three months.

It was apparently during the hiatus that the cousins had lunch with a visitor from Washington which led to radical alterations in some of their scripts. As Fred recounted the incident decades later: "One day . . . I got a call from someone who said he represented the head of OWI . . . , which was the Office of War Information during World War II. He asked if he could meet the two of us for lunch in New York. . . . When we met him he said that they were having a problem with getting propaganda to the American people during wartime." All government programs were required by law to begin with "The United States Government Presents," and at that announcement everybody turned the dial. "They wanted entertainment, they didn't want this kind of open propaganda. . . . So he said that they would like to crack this problem . . . and that the two of us, my partner and me, were the answer." Would Fred and Manny agree, without telling anyone at the network or the sponsor, to incorporate certain official propaganda motifs into their scripts so that "the message" would get across to unwary Americans in whodunit guise?

The series kicked off its third season with an episode that demonstrated the use of a script for OWI propaganda. "The World Series Crime" (October 8, 1942) opens three hours before the seventh game, with the "Eagles" team hiring Ellery to break the jinx on its powerhouse hitter by recovering his lucky bat, Uncle Sam, which was stolen the morning after game three. Ellery succeeds just in time for the home run that leads the Eagles to victory, showcasing OWI's slogan for the day: "You can always trust your Uncle Sam!" Ironically enough, in 1985 a Japanese publisher issued the script as a booklet, with notes intended to help youths in that country who were studying English.

One of the finest episodes in the series and a special favorite of all Sherlockians is "Mr. Short and Mr. Long" (January 14, 1943), which was inspired by Dr. Watson's cryptic reference to the man who returned to his house for an umbrella and was never seen again. Confined to bed, Ellery functions as his own armchair detective, devising several wonderful suggestions as to how the man could have vanished from a house surrounded by police, then topping even the best of them with a magnificent analysis of how the trick was really worked. Retitled "The Disappearance of Mr. James Phillimore," the script was printed in Queen's soon suppressed anthology *The Misadventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1944).

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In August 1943, during the summer cycle of 13 reruns, Carleton Young signed a Hollywood contract and left the program. His replacement was Sydney Smith (1909–1978), who before his death described for me how he got the part. "I read and reread all the [Queen] novels in order to establish a distinctive approach. I decided the intent was to create an American Holmes. . . . Keeping that in mind, I began to work on a characterization. . . . I adopted a Ronald Colman approach, but with no attempt to ape an English intonation or accent. I was pleased when Manny said I was an American Sherlock."

Listeners may have noticed the difference in voice between Smith and his predecessor, but it's unlikely that anyone was aware of the next change in the regular cast. Near the end of the summer reruns, Marian Shockley, whose husband George Zachary had joined the Navy and was stationed in the Pacific, on doctor's orders took two months' leave from the role of Nikki. She was replaced by her former roommate Helen Lewis, a specialist in voice impersonations, who made it a point to sound as much like Shockley as possible.

With Smith and Lewis playing Ellery and Nikki and Santos Ortega and Ted de Corsia carrying on as Inspector Queen and Sergeant Velie, the fourth season began in October 1943. Lewis left and Shockley returned to the role of Nikki early in November. The series stayed on the air through the end of 1944, with not a single week off. If Fred or Manny fell behind schedule, they had only two options: condense another 60-minute script from the 1939–40 period into half-hour form or recycle one of their earliest 30-minute dramas. Research confirms that they exercised both options often.

Of the new episodes heard during the fourth season, one of the finest was that audacious miracle problem "The Dauphin's Doll" (December 22, 1943), which is unique among the 355 segments of the series in that its author was Manny Lee alone, without any input from Fred Dannay. Ellery, his father, and dozens of the inspector's men join forces to protect the titular doll and its diamond crown from the legendary thief Comus, who announces that he'll make the figure vanish while it's on exhibit at a major department store on the day before Christmas. Despite a gauntlet of security arrangements, Comus lives up to his boast, but Ellery's reasoning exposes the working of the miracle and nets both thief and loot as Christmas dawn floods the city. Manny later recast his script into the short story of the same name *(EQMM,* December 1948; collected in *Calendar of Crime,* 1952), which is equally dazzling.

NBC continued to broadcast and Bromo-Seltzer to sponsor the series until the end of 1944, when it left the air for almost a month. It returned not on NBC but on CBS, where it had started, with a

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new time slot (Wednesdays from 7:30 to 8:00 P.M. EST) and Anacin taking over sponsorship. Sydney Smith, Santos Ortega, and Ted de Corsia continued in the male leads, but Marian Shockley had been replaced by Barbara Terrell and new producers and directors came aboard, too. With only two brief summer vacations, the series stayed on CBS from late January of 1945 until mid-1947.

What was not known outside the inner circle of the production team was that Fred Dannay had dropped out, having found it impossible to keep devising so many plots so quickly. His wife Mary was near death from cancer (which took her later in 1945), and Fred knew he'd have to make arrangements for himself and his two young sons. In the time he had left for work he wanted to concentrate on projects he found more congenial, like editing the monthly issues of *EQMM* and compiling anthologies of short mystery fiction. But he didn't want and, especially with two children to raise, couldn't afford to give up his share of the huge weekly checks from the radio series. Why, he asked himself, couldn't the creation of the detailed plotlines that were his contribution be (to use the current expression) outsourced? As long as the writers who took over his function were chosen with sufficient care, the listening audience wouldn't be able to tell the difference.

After some false starts with scripters who didn't work out, the cousins settled on Anthony Boucher (1911–1968), the well-known mystery writer and reviewer of whodunits for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and later the *New York Times* and *EQMM*. It was an inspired selection. Boucher had started writing detective fiction out of admiration for fair-play masters like Queen, his character Fergus O'Breen had been conceived as a sort of West Coast EQ with brogue, several of his short stories had already appeared in *EQMM*, and he was a longtime fan of the Queen radio series. Beginning with "The Corpse of Mr. Entwhistle" (June 13, 1945), about 70 of the Queen scripts were written by the never-credited Boucher and Manny Lee.

Both Boucher and Fred Dannay loved pure deductive problems that played scrupulously fair with the reader, but their personalities were poles apart. Fred was a private man: apolitical, uninvolved in causes, at home in abstractions. Boucher, like Manny, was a public man, politically active and staunchly liberal. Unlike either Fred or Manny, Boucher was deeply religious. Fred's forte had been the kind of script in which Ellery would confront various suspects with diagrammatic names and functional personalities—Mr. Anson the attorney, Mr. Benson the ballplayer, and Mr. Charleson the cheesemaker—and would deduce that only one of them possessed a trait that the murderer must have had. Boucher could conjure up this kind of storyline, too, but his tended to be more rooted in reality and he devoted more care to characterization. It was during the Boucher-Lee years that Ellery morphed from Celebrated

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Gentleman Detective to Socially Concerned Citizen.

Boucher's file copies of synopses, each one banged out in minuscule type on six to eight sheets of yellow paper, are preserved at Indiana University's Lilly Library, along with copies of most of the final scripts as fleshed out by Manny and of the Boucher-Lee correspondence. Reading this material is a fascinating experience akin to traveling backward in time. The letters between the two men document one of the deepest literary friendships of the century and cry out to be published someday as a book. Boucher's synopses for EQ plots are also very much like friendly letters, full of little asides in which he explains to Manny where this or that idea came from or what movie actor Boucher had in mind in creating this or that suspect. Comparing any given synopsis with the final script reveals that Manny often made radical changes in Boucher's synopses. Indeed, several were never used at all.

Writing for the Queen series was one of the toughest jobs in radio. "Admittedly, we have a very difficult formula," Manny told Boucher in a letter of May 17, 1945. In his reply of June 6, Boucher fervently agreed: "Queen shows are several hundred % harder to compose than [Sherlock] Holmes shows [which he was also writing]—and, I suppose, a few thousand % harder than many of the things that pass for radio mysteries." To which Manny responded on June 13: "Are you finding [that] out? It's made us [himself and Dannay] old before our time."

Of the last ten episodes from the fifth season, eight were based on Boucher synopses. The only one known to survive on tape is "Nick the Knife" (August 1, 1945), which is both immensely exciting in its own right and historically crucial as a forerunner of perhaps the finest Queen novel, *Cat of Many Tails* (1949). A madman has slashed the wrists and faces of more than thirty beautiful women on Manhattan's night streets. Finally a woman is attacked inside an ornamental maze with only one exit, which Ellery and several policemen are watching. Later events seem to prove beyond doubt that none of the handful of suspects found in the maze could possibly be the slasher. Ellery resolves the puzzle magnificently, although most listeners probably fell into the trap for the overly clever that Boucher and Manny cunningly built into the story.

In mid August 1945 the series took a brief vacation, returning three weeks later for a sixth season that lasted a full 52 weeks, with no changes in sponsorship, network, or time slot and only one newcomer in the regular cast: Gertrude Warner (1917–1986), who had replaced Barbara Terrell as Nikki late in the previous season. Boucher provided the plots for 36 of these episodes. Six others were written by Lee from synopses by Fred Dannay which Manny had held in reserve against emergencies after Fred left the series. One of the most interesting of the half-dozen is "The Curious Thefts"

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(December 19, 1945), in which a well-known novelist tormented by a collapsing marriage comes to Ellery for help when his household is plagued by a rash of bizarre pilferings which culminate in murder.

The solution presupposes a fairly intimate knowledge of the Bible, and the script as a whole is clearly something of a rough sketch for certain elements in Queen's powerful religio-detective novel *Ten Days' Wonder* (1948).

Boucher and Lee's "The Armchair Detective" (March 27, 1946) is a rare gem in which Ellery solves a poisoning that takes place on the Queen show itself. The idea obviously came to Boucher from Orson Welles' 1938 radio version of *The War of the Worlds,* which convinced thousands of panicky listeners that Martians had invaded New Jersey. First Ellery interprets the dying-message clue in the conventional way, then he gets fancy and works out a much more complex reading, whose possibility the killer has also seen and planted evidence to support.

"The Phantom Shadow" (March 6, 1946) was based on Boucher's synopsis "The Shadow of Murder," in which a woman visits Ellery and claims that while working late at night she witnessed a murder through the window of the lawyer's office across the street, although when the office is examined neither a corpse nor any signs of a struggle are found. Lee kept the plot—an obvious take-off on Cornell Woolrich's classic "Rear Window" (1942)—but in his version the woman is Nikki, who witnesses the murder that wasn't while filling in on a night secretarial job for a girlfriend.

On October 9, 1946, the seventh season commenced, this one lasting 27 weeks and with a much tighter budget. Boucher was involved with so many other projects that he could contribute only ten new synopses for Manny to expand into scripts. Since Gertrude Warner had recently married and retired from radio, the producers needed a new Nikki Porter and, after auditioning forty women, hired Charlotte Keane. Around the end of the year the three longest-lived of the four regulars in the cast—Ted de Corsia as Sergeant Velie, Santos Ortega as Inspector Queen, and Sydney Smith, who had played Ellery since the summer of 1943—were replaced. Richard Coogan (1914–), who took over as Ellery, is the only actor to play the master detective in any medium who is still alive. After about two months Coogan himself was replaced by Lawrence Dobkin (1919–2002). Between mid April 1947 and the first week of August, the series again left the air except for two weeks in June when it mysteriously reappeared.

By the program's eighth and final season, which began on August 3, the master sleuth of the airwaves had become a socially involved liberal very much like Tony Boucher and Manny Lee. Each episode began with Ellery's solemn intonation: "I dedicate this program to the fight against crime—not only crimes of violence and crimes of dishonesty, but also crimes of intolerance, discrimination, and bad

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citizenship—crimes against America." And a similar oration came at the sign-off: "This is Ellery Queen saying goodnight until next week, and enlisting all Americans every night, and every day, in the fight against bad citizenship, bigotry, and discrimination—the crimes which are weakening America." Lee wrote these words not just for ideological reasons but as a survival tactic. The radio whodunit had come under attack from various self-anointed social critics who claimed the genre glorified crime, and several series had already been canceled. In a letter to Boucher dated April 7, 1947, Manny said: "I am going to try to make every possible Queen show on NBC this summer some sort of 'crusade,' or some damn thing, so that they won't have any possible kick coming about how we're an evil influence on the kiddies."

The summer episodes confirm that the new social conscience of the series permeated many of the scripts. Boucher and Lee's "Murder for Americans" (August 17, 1947) takes place in an upstate New York community flooded by hate pamphlets that target Jews, Catholics, and blacks (for whom the proper word then was Negroes, with capital N). While visiting the city Ellery is asked by a ten-year-old Jewish girl to find her vanished friend, the daughter of an Irish cop. The hate literature turns out to be the work of a white businessman, looking to buy up a certain neighborhood cheap by turning its people against each other. In a letter to Boucher dated May 2, 1947, Manny credited his wife Kaye with the episode's title and called it "the most important script I have done in eight years of this kind of labor."

Late in September the series once again went on hiatus, returning after two months as a "sustainer" the way it had been during its first months of life back in 1939-40. Most likely the liberal slant of the scripts had given the people at Anacin a headache. Everyone in the regular cast except Larry Dobkin was replaced during the hiatus. Near the end of the year, the role of Nikki was taken over by Kaye Brinker, Manny's wife.

George Zachary, the original producer-director of the Queen series, had resumed his radio career after World War II and during the 1947–48 season was in charge of *Ford Theatre,* a 60-minute anthology series broadcast Sunday afternoons on NBC. Late in 1947 he decided to reassemble the original Queen cast—Hugh Marlowe, Santos Ortega, Ted de Corsia—and restage one of the original hour-long episodes. The one he chose was "The Bad Boy" (July 30, 1939). In a December 1947 letter to Boucher, Manny said that on hearing of Zachary's plan "I asked George to send me the script. It confirmed some of my worst fears, and I spent about 36 hours more or less consecutively rewriting it. Gad, some of the dialogue!" He might have been able to improve the script but could do little about Hugh Marlowe's return to the role of Ellery. "I wrote George to please, please try to take the stuffing out of Marlowe's

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shirt and make him sound—I know it can be done only approximately—like a human being." The new version, heard on January 4, 1948, survives on audiotape and gives us some idea of what the 1939–40 episodes must have sounded like.

In January 1948 a final wave of changes washed over the weekly Queen series. Its time slot was moved to Thursday evenings, 8:30 to 9:00 P.M., and Larry Dobkin left the role of Ellery. He continued to act in radio and later television and eventually became a director, working on *The Rifleman, 77 Sunset Strip, The Donna Reed Show, Barnaby Jones, The Waltons,* and countless other series. Howard Culver (1918–1984) took over as Ellery for the final 18 episodes, eight Boucher-Lee originals and ten reruns.

One of these last segments that Manny took special pride in was "A Question of Color" (February 12, 1948), based on Boucher's synopsis "The Innocent Fraud." "What I did with it," he told Boucher in a letter of February 4, "was to make it a story of a Negro fighter. The cast of characters is almost entirely Negro—his manager, his girl, the old gal who runs his camp, and his trainer. . . . I have thrown away your clue, your solution, and invented brand-new material. . . . I have made no concessions either to racism or to its opposite, glorification. These are real Negroes, some good, some bad, in a believable human-interest situation. . . . I have a very quiet little scene in which the Negro fighter, my hero, is refused service in a tavern because he is colored. My tavern keeper makes no bones about why he won't serve. . . . I have an idea some Negroes may not like it, because I don't gild the race. But I'll risk that to push my own credo that the only solution of the problem lies in treating Negroes as if they were people, and not as if they were animals or angels."

The only restraint Manny imposed on himself, he told Boucher, was "to forgo use of the word 'nigger'" because "there wasn't a chance in the universe of getting it on the air." A few months later, in "The Three Frogs" (April 29, 1948), he found a legitimate use for the word. While hunting a Faginesque hidden mastermind who has organized a youth gang for criminal purposes, Ellery and Sergeant Velie discuss which of their suspects is the Frog.

> VELIE: Hey, wait a minute. Frog! The Frenchman! That's a slang word for Frenchman!
> ELLERY: Yes, and as nasty a word, Sergeant, as kike, nigger, wop, Polack or any of the other insulting terms some people use to assert their purely imaginary superiority over their fellow citizens.
> VELIE: Awww, I didn't mean it that way, Maestro.

The last new episode of the series was Boucher and Lee's "Misery Mike" (May 20, 1948). The title character (called Miserere Mike in the synopsis) reflects both Boucher's function on the Queen series

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and his love of opera: the nickname comes from Mike's habit of playing the "Miserere" from *Il Trovatore* on the accordion, and he earns his living dreaming up new ideas for rackets just as Boucher earned his conjuring up plot outlines. After one final rerun on May 27, *The Adventures of Ellery Queen* left network radio forever.

Manny explained the axing of the series in a letter to Boucher dated May 5, 1948, saying that the network "sold our time out from under us for a commercial [program] . . . and have nowhere else to put us. . . . Exactly what I was afraid of when the deal was first set up. . . . I am as thoroughly disgusted with the chicanery of mortal man as ever in my life and I could wish for a sign from heaven or anywhere else that man is not the lowest form of animation in the whole of creation."

Between 1965 and 1967, Ellery returned to radio, though in name only, in a syndicated package of 520 "Minute Mysteries." Fred and Manny had nothing to do with the project beyond endorsing checks from Creative Marketing and Communications Corporation for the use of their character, who was played by Bill Owen. A typical 60- second segment (my own pastiche, not a transcript) would sound something like this.

> FRIEND: Congratulate me, Ellery. What a deal I just made! Here, look at what I bought this morning. An ancient Roman coin in mint condition. And it only cost me ten thousand dollars!
> ELLERY: Hmmm . . . according to these Roman numerals on the coin, it was minted in 37 B.C. Come on, let's find a policeman and visit that dealer's shop before he can cash your check. The coin's a fake.
> FRIEND: (flabbergasted) Why—how do you know that, Ellery?

Anyone who can't figure that out needs to go back to third grade. These silly vignettes are reported to have caused outbreaks of giggles among personnel of the stations that aired them, but they could still be heard around the country in odd moments of the broadcast day until the early 1980s. When the licenses to air these programs were terminated, the Creative Marketing geniuses bleeped out Ellery's name from the audio masters and substituted "John Q."

They're all gone now: Fred, Manny, George Zachary, Tony Boucher, everyone who had a continuing role in the network series except ninety-year-old Richard Coogan, who played Ellery for a few short weeks. The series began on radio four years before I was born, and I was five when it was canceled. I never heard a single episode "live" but, thanks to audiotape and the easier to take for granted miracle of print, I can almost believe that I listened to it every week. To all those who helped make *The Adventures of Ellery Queen* a radio reality: Thanks for the memories. ●

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The Adventure of

The Man Who Could Double the Size of Diamonds

by Ellery Queen

The Characters

ELLERY QUEEN ..... *the detective*
NIKKI PORTER ..... *his secretary*
INSPECTOR QUEEN ..... *his father*
SERGEANT VELIE ..... *of Inspector Queen's staff*
PROFESSOR LAZARUS ..... *an inventor*
KENYON ..... *an American diamond dealer*
VAN HOOTEN ..... *a Dutch diamond dealer*
BRYCE ..... *a British diamond dealer*
MASSET ..... *a French lapidary*
DR. COOK ..... *the examining physician*

SCENE I: *Kenyon's Office, Maiden Lane*

(Kenyon is laughing very hard. He is a hard-headed businessman. Professor Lazarus is an enthusiastic crackpot.)

LAZARUS: . . . and in my wonderful new diamond-manufacturing process—Why are you laughing, Mr. Kenyon?

KENYON: *(Stops and coughs)* Hrrm! You're an inventor, you say, Professor Lazarus?

LAZARUS: Inventor, chemist, physicist, explorer into the hidden secrets of Nature . . . yes, Mr. Kenyon, a man of pure science, pure science! That's why I've come to you first, Mr. Kenyon. You're one of the leading diamond experts on Maiden Lane.

KENYON: *(Gravely)* Thank you, Professor. And you—uh—say you can *manufacture* diamonds? *(He suppresses a laugh.)*

LAZARUS: *(Excited)* It's a colossal discovery! Are you familiar with the experiments of Moissan—changing pure carbon into artificial diamonds?

KENYON: *(Tolerantly)* Oh, come, Professor. Moissan's process has no commercial future. The cost of making the diamonds is considerably more than the diamonds are worth!

LAZARUS: True, Mr. Kenyon, true. But I've gone far beyond Moissan! My new process will revolutionize the diamond industry—change the financial structure of the world!

KENYON: *(Laughing)* Financial structure of the . . . *(Wiping the tears away)* Sorry, Professor Lazarus, I . . . I've got a tickle.

LAZARUS: *(Offended)* They laughed at Leeuwenhoek and Pasteur and Galileo. Well, laugh! Let 'em all laugh! *(Mutters)* They always laugh at a genius. . . .

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KENYON: *(Sharply)* See here, man. You expect me to believe you've discovered a process by which you can manufacture diamonds at a cost that's not prohibitive? Fairy tales!

LAZARUS: Mr. Kenyon, give me a perfect diamond, and in seven days I'll return it to you *twice as large!*

KENYON: The man who could double the size of diamonds! *(He laughs again.)*

LAZARUS: *(Excited) Don't* laugh at me! I've done it, I tell you!

KENYON: *(With mock gravity)* Sort of scientific miracle, eh?

LAZARUS: Scientific fact! I've discovered one of Nature's secrets, Mr. Kenyon!

KENYON: Professor Lazarus and Mother Nature, Incorporated. Uh . . . how do you accomplish this miracle?

LAZARUS: *(Slyly)* Aha! Wouldn't you like to know! But I'll tell you this. It's a complex process based upon the introduction into the molecular structure of perfectly formed natural diamonds of certain chemical elements—don't ask me which ones, I won't tell you! But by this process I can double the size and weight of the original diamond! I've found a way to *grow diamonds chemically!*

KENYON: *(Amazed)* I believe you're really serious.

LAZARUS: Serious! I've devoted my whole life to it!

KENYON: *(Thoughtfully)* Perhaps I've been hasty, Professor. But why come to me? Why not go it alone?

LAZARUS: Because I'm penniless. My life's savings have gone into perfecting the formula and developing the apparatus. I need financial backing, Mr. Kenyon!

KENYON: *(Dryly)* I should say you need raw material!—in this case, perfect diamonds. Didn't you say you've got to start with natural diamonds?

LAZARUS: Yes, Mr. Kenyon. Now look. I don't blame you for being sceptical. You're a businessman. So I don't expect you to take me on faith.

KENYON: *(Surprised)* You mean you're actually prepared to demonstrate your process, Professor?

LAZARUS: Of course, Mr. Kenyon!

KENYON: *Under any conditions I may impose on you?*

LAZARUS: Absolutely any conditions!

KENYON: *(Very serious—abruptly)* Professor Lazarus, be back here tomorrow!

SCENE 2: *The Same, Next Day*

(A slight argument is going on.)

VAN HOOTEN: *(He is a fat Dutch merchant.)* Andt I say it is all poppycock!

KENYON: It won't hurt to look, will it, Van Hooten?

BRYCE: *(A slim London businessman)* Kenyon's right, Van Hooten. You've been stuck away in that Amsterdam diamond-exchange of

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yours so long you've grown barnacles. Take a chance, old boy!

VAN HOOTEN: All righdt, I take a chance, Mr. Bryce. Doubling the size of diamonds! *(Short laugh)* I don't know whether it is to laugh, or to cry.

KENYON: Fine! Then you're with us, too, Bryce?

BRYCE: *(Chuckling)* Hard to convince, but open to proof. The true British spirit, Kenyon. Yes, I'm with you and Van Hooten. How about you, Monsieur Masset?

MASSET: *(A pudgy little French expert)* I am thinking.

VAN HOOTEN: *(Snort)* Masset is thinking! Do not breathe.

KENYON: We really need you in this little syndicate we're forming, Masset. As a lapidary you've no equal. You're better qualified than any of us to detect a possible fraud.

MASSET: Monsieur Kenyon, that is a bouquet I cannot resist smelling! Gentlemen, Masset enters the syndicate! Mynheer Van Hooten, Mr. Bryce—congratulate yourselves! *(They all laugh a little.)*

VAN HOOTEN: *But to double the size of diamonds! This professor is* a fraud. He must be.

BRYCE: I know it sounds like a fantastic idea . . .

MASSET: *(Thoughtfully) Qui sait?* In the eighteenth century *le comte* Saint-Germain proved to King Louis the Fifteenth that not only could he remove flaws from diamonds but increase the size of pearls!

VAN HOOTEN: *(Scoffing)* A legend, Masset! Folklore!

BRYCE: Well, we'll soon see. Personally, I think the man's a quack, Kenyon.

KENYON: Judge for yourselves. Now we're all agreed on our conditions, gentlemen? *(As they agree a door opens off accompanied by a warning-bell, which keeps ringing.)* Yes, Wolfe? He's here?

MAN: *(Entering)* Yes, Mr. Kenyon. It's Professor Lazarus.

KENYON: Send him in. And remember, Wolfe—no interruptions!

MAN: Yes, Mr. Kenyon. This way, Professor Lazarus.

LAZARUS: Thank you, thank you! *(The door closes and the bell stops.)*

KENYON: Come in, Professor! I want you to meet some business friends of mine. We've decided to form a little syndicate . . . just in case. Mynheer Van Hooten, the Amsterdam diamond merchant—Mr. Bryce, the London diamond-dealer—Monsieur Masset, the famous lapidary.

LAZARUS: A syndicate, eh? Excellent, excellent. Delighted!

VAN HOOTEN: Don't be too delighted, Professor Lazarus. We are a court of examination—no more!

BRYCE: Frankly, Professor, we don't know whether you're the genius you claim to be, or a lunatic.

MASSET: You will find us hard, Professor Lazarus. We do not believe you. But on the million-to-one chance that you have really stumbled on a new scientific principle . . .

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KENYON: In a word, we're willing to be shown. *(They all murmur assent.)*

VAN HOOTEN: Providing, of course, thadt the conditions under which the experiment is conducted protecdt the syndicate against any possibility of loss, mynheer!

LAZARUS: Naturally, naturally, Mr. Van Hooten. You would be fools not to protect yourselves!

KENYON: All right, then. Professor, do you see the steel safe door in that wall of my office?

LAZARUS: Yes, Mr. Kenyon?

BRYCE: That safe door leads into Mr. Kenyon's strongroom. The strongroom is completely lined with steel and has only one means of entrance and exit—the burglar-proof safe door you see there.

MASSET: In that strongroom, *mon professeur,* you will *try* to double the size of diamonds!

LAZARUS: I understand. But air—I'll need air to breathe—

KENYON: My strongroom is air-conditioned. ("Ah!") Incidentally I'm having the door combination changed. And only Van Hooten, Bryce, Masset, and I will know the new combination!

VAN HOOTEN: You comprehend, Professor? Not you! You will be admitted by one of us into the strongroom each morning, andt released each nighdt! *(Lazarus indicates that he grasps the idea.)*

BRYCE: You may install your apparatus in the strongroom and go to work on our diamonds, Lazarus!

LAZARUS: Very fair, very fair, gentlemen. But may I make one condition? No one must disturb my work. I refuse to allow anyone to enter that strongroom the entire week of my experiment—either while I'm working there during the day, or while it's locked up for the night!

VAN HOOTEN: *(Suspiciously)* Ah! Andt why is that, Professor?

LAZARUS: Obviously I must protect *myself.* I can't afford to let anyone learn the secret of my process! *(Remarks of: "That's fair," "Of course," etc.)*

MASSET: Agreed, then. But we warn you, *monsieur le professeur!* That room will be guarded as if it were the Bank of France!

BRYCE: We should have experienced searchers to see that—*(Coughs)*—the professor doesn't carry off our diamonds some night after his day's work.

KENYON: How about four detectives from Police Headquarters? Two to stand guard outside the strongroom all day, two all night.

VAN HOOTEN: Andt each nighdt when you leave the strongroom, Lazarus, you will be searched from headt to foot!

MASSET: *Mais certainement!* That I insist on!

BRYCE: *(Smoothly)* And to leave utterly nothing to chance, gentlemen—I suggest we have a trustworthy physician in attendance to—ah—complete the nightly search. *(Enthusiastic agreement from the others.)*

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KENYON: *(Dryly)* You see, Professor, we're taking no chances. Since we're each lending you a valuable diamond to experiment on, take my word for it—you won't get the slightest opportunity to steal them!

LAZARUS: Steal! I'm a scientist, not a thief! Very well, we start tomorrow when I bring my apparatus in. But remember: Absolute secrecy! If the world learned of what we can do, the value of diamonds would be ruined forever! *(They agree)* Tomorrow each of you have a perfect diamond for me, in Mr. Kenyon's office, and I promise you—in one week your four diamonds will have grown to twice their present size! *(He laughs)* Like the Count of Monte Cristo—in one week you'll be able to cry: The world is mine!

SCENE 3: *The Queen Apartment, a Week Later*
(Kenyon is ending his story)

KENYON: . . . and then, Mr. Queen, Professor Lazarus went to work in my strongroom at the office.

ELLERY QUEEN: *(Thoughtfully)* Amazing. Amazing story, Mr. Kenyon.

INSPECTOR QUEEN: So that's why you asked for the services of four of my detectives a week ago, Mr. Kenyon! *(Chuckles)* Weren't you gentlemen a little plastered when Lazarus turned on his high-falutin gas?

NIKKI PORTER: Why, it's fantastic! An Arabian Nights' story!

ELLERY: Why did you bring your friend Dr. Cook with you, Mr. Kenyon? No offense, Doctor; just curiosity.

KENYON: Dr. Cook is the physician who's been examining Lazarus every night when he quits the strongroom.

DR. COOK: *(He's a scientific robot)* Would have refused anyone but Kenyon, Mr. Queen. Old friends. But of all the nonsense! Wait till you hear the end of this!

KENYON: In the week that's passed since the professor began his mysterious work in my strongroom, we've taken every precaution against fraud, Mr. Queen. Well, this afternoon at five we let the professor out, as usual. Seventh day—his time was up. "Well?" we demanded. "Show us our diamonds, twice as large!" The professor was nervous . . .

INSPECTOR: *(Chuckling)* Doubling the size of diamonds!

NIKKI: Of course he failed, Mr. Kenyon?

ELLERY: And asked for more time? That would be the natural development.

KENYON: Exactly what happened! Well, the detectives and we five men—we searched him—Dr. Cook here examined him with special care—and then, satisfied the diamonds weren't on him, we let him go for the night.

DR. COOK: And the syndicate went into a huddle. *(Chuckles)*

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KENYON: After an argument, we decided to extend the professor's time a few days. The others left, I went out for dinner . . . and started to worry. Suppose something *was* wrong! I'd got the other three into this; they'd contributed valuable diamonds as well as I. . . . Well, I ran back to my office. The two detectives on night duty let me in—I unlocked the safe door of the strongroom and went in . . .

INSPECTOR: *(Sharply)* Don't tell me . . .

NIKKI: The four diamonds you gave Lazarus to work on—

ELLERY: They were gone from the strongroom, Mr. Kenyon?

KENYON: *(Despairing)* Vanished! Not a sight of them! I turned that strongroom upside down! Tore his apparatus to pieces! Then I called the detectives in. They thought I was crazy, till they saw for themselves.

ELLERY: Seems simple enough, Mr. Kenyon. Professor Lazarus managed to smuggle the diamonds out with him during the past week, perhaps taking one diamond at a time, and your nightly searches just didn't turn up his hiding place.

KENYON: Impossible, Mr. Queen! We didn't overlook even the most far-fetched hiding place! That's why I stopped to pick up Dr. Cook on my way to see you tonight, after I left messages for Van Hooten, Bryce, and Masset that the diamonds were gone.

DR. COOK: I give you my word, Mr. Queen—I can't imagine where the fellow could have been hiding those diamonds when he took them out.

ELLERY: How about his clothing?

KENYON: We examined every stitch on his body every night—not only we four, but the detectives, too!

INSPECTOR: The men I put on this job, Ellery, wouldn't slip up on a body search. They're perfectly reliable.

NIKKI: I know! Lazarus must have a hump on his back—a false hump! Or else he's got a hollow wooden leg, or something!

DR. COOK: No hump, false limp, finger . . . nothing like that.

ELLERY: How about his hair, Doctor? Has he a beard?

DR. COOK: No beard, and the man's as bald as an eagle.

ELLERY: His mouth, Doctor. Did you examine him there?

DR. COOK: Lazarus has no teeth of his own. He uses dental plates, which I examined carefully every night. No cavities of any kind. Nor could he have taken the diamonds out in his ears or nasal openings.

NIKKI: A glass eye! I'll bet that's it.

DR. COOK: No, Miss Porter. He has two very sound eyes.

ELLERY: Possibly he carried some *object* out of the strongroom in which a diamond might have been concealed. A watch—("No!")—cigarette case—("No . . .")

INSPECTOR: Wallet? ("It was examined.") Tobacco pouch? ("No, Inspector.") A finger-ring? ("No.")

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NIKKI: A cane! A walking-stick that's hollow!

KENYON: *(Sighing)* The professor has no stick. I tell you we examined everything. Even his pen and pencil.

ELLERY: Mr. Kenyon, is there a drain or water-tap in the strongroom?

KENYON: No opening of any kind except the air-conditioning vent and intake—and they were thoroughly searched.

NIKKI: Then couldn't he have hidden the diamonds *inside* of him, Dr. Cook?

ELLERY: *(Chuckling)* Excellent question, Nikki! Could he?

DR. COOK: I performed every conceivable test that would be conclusive, Mr. Queen—gastroscope, otoscope, nasal speculum, and so on. If X-ray or fluoroscope would have helped, I'd have used those too, because Mr. Kenyon and his associates told me to leave absolutely nothing to chance. I give you my word as a medical man, Mr. Queen—Professor Lazarus did *not* hide those four diamonds anywhere *in* his body! *(The phone rings.)*

NIKKI: I'll answer it, Inspector.

INSPECTOR: No, I'll take it, Nikki. Probably Headquarters, with my men's report of the theft. . . .

ELLERY: Fascinating problem, gentlemen! *(The inspector answers the phone.)* It appears we're dealing with the most ingenious thief of modern times. We'll have to see your Professor Lazarus . . .

INSPECTOR: Ellery, stop a minute. I can't hear . . . Hello! Who?

SERGEANT VELIE: *(On the other end)* This is Velie, Inspector!

INSPECTOR: Oh! Yes, Velie? Why aren't you home with your wife?

VELIE: I'm married to my job, ain't I? Inspector, you'll have to buzz downtown. A murder.

INSPECTOR: Why do they always pick out a man's bedtime! Well, well, Velie. Where is it?

VELIE: Some crummy hotel—the Jolly, or Jelly, or somepin', on East Twenty-fourth. Guy was found dead in his room by a chambermaid. Somebody's played chopsticks on his naked skull.

INSPECTOR: I'll be right down. Identify the corpse yet, Velie?

VELIE: Oh, sure. Some nut inventor, from the papers in his room . . .

INSPECTOR: Nut invent—! *(Hoarsely)* Velie! What was his name?

VELIE: Aw, you wouldn't know him, Inspector. A phony professor. Let's see, now. Yeah . . . Lazarus—Professor Lazarus!

SCENE 4: *A Room in a New York Hotel, Later*

(A mean little hotel room filled with chattering detectives, police, etc.)

VELIE: *(Over the hubbub)* Say, Whitey! Inspector's yellin' for that fingerprint report! *(Whitey shouts)* What? That's nice! The old man'll love that! . . . Joe! Ain't you through muggin' the stiff? Get pictures of the struggle—bloody lamp, overturned chairs, torn clo'es . . . man, what a brawl this musta been!

INSPECTOR: *(Calling)* Velie! Where's Prouty? . . . Quiet, men!

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VELIE: *(Bellowing)* Qui-et, you hyenas! *(The hubbub quiets)* Doc Prouty's gone already, Inspector. Nothing sensational, he says. Guy just died from those blows on the head while he was fightin' with his killer. Happened tonight.

INSPECTOR: That's *very* helpful! Ellery, did you see this?

ELLERY: *(Absently)* What, Dad? Oh, sorry.

NIKKI: Ellery Queen! You don't seem the least bit interested! What is it, Inspector? . . . Oh, what a *beautiful* diamond.

VELIE: My old woman'd give her right eye for a sparkler like that. Where'd you find it, Inspector?

INSPECTOR: In Lazarus's right hand. Mr. Kenyon!

VELIE: Kenyon! Over here, Mr. Kenyon! Watch it! Don't step on his hand!

KENYON: *(He is very upset)* Oh! Did I? I mean . . . for heaven's sake, this is awful! Awful!

ELLERY: *(Low)* Let's see the diamond, Dad . . . Hmm . . .

INSPECTOR: Kenyon, do you recognize this diamond? *(Kenyon examines it.)*

KENYON: It's Bryce's! The diamond Bryce contributed to the syndicate for the professor's experiment!

INSPECTOR: That settles it. Only Van Hooten, Bryce, Masset, and Kenyon knew about Lazarus's experiment—even the detectives on day and night duty didn't know what was going on!

VELIE: So it musta been one of the syndicate that bumped off the dead con man.

KENYON: One of *us?* Dont be—! *(Thoughtfully)* One of *us?*

INSPECTOR: One of you four men came to the professor's hotel room tonight, caught him with the stolen diamonds, and tried to take them away. Lazarus fought back and was beaten to death with this heavy metal table lamp. Murderer grabbed the diamonds and beat it.

NIKKI: But in the excitement he overlooked one of the diamonds—the one in the dead man's hand—

VELIE: Or maybe he thought he'd taken all four and didn't find out it was only three till he got away—then he was scared to come back.

NIKKI: But the big question is: Which of the four members of the syndicate killed Professor Lazarus?

INSPECTOR: What d'ye think, Ellery?

ELLERY: *(Thoughtfully)* Three secrets may have died with Lazarus. First, the secret of his diamond-doubling process—whose authenticity I doubt. Second, the secret of his murderer's identity—in this well-lighted room, after a considerable struggle, Lazarus must certainly have recognized his assailant. And third, the secret of how Lazarus managed to spirit those diamonds out of Kenyon's strongroom—past the suspicious eyes and searching

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hands of the four owners of the diamonds, two experienced detectives, and a medical doctor!

NIKKI: It's enough to make you dizzy. I can't *imagine!*

ELLERY: At the moment, neither can I, Nikki. I confess—I'd rather know how Lazarus accomplished the thefts than who murdered him!

VELIE: You would.

INSPECTOR: Velie!

VELIE: *(Hastily)* Yeah, Inspector?

INSPECTOR: Round up Van Hooten, Bryce, and that French lap—lap—whatever he is!—Masset. Get 'em down here on the double and we'll go over 'em—lightly!

VELIE: *(Fading)* Lemme slap on the hot towel . . . !

INSPECTOR: Ellery, *you* can play around with the mystery of how Professor Lazarus stole those diamonds—*I* want to know who beat him to death!

SCENE 5: *The Same, Later*

(Inspector Queen is grilling the suspects. Bryce is saying: "Yes, that is my diamond, Inspector." The others demand the return of their property.)

INSPECTOR: Murderer's got 'em! I want to know where you men were tonight. Bryce?

BRYCE: *(Nervously)* I was out strolling . . . returned to my hotel, found Kenyon's message that the diamonds had been stolen . . . thought it was a—a joke . . .

INSPECTOR: Mynheer Van Hooten? You were in the Park writing poetry, I suppose?

VAN HOOTEN: *(Yelling)* I go back to my New York office! Later I go back to my hotel—find Kenyon's message—

INSPECTOR: *(Softly)* So you've no alibi, either. How about you, Monsieur Masset?

MASSET: I, too, *Monsieur l'inspecteur*—I returned to my office on Maiden Lane. And I, too—I later find Monsieur Kenyon's message about the theft of the diamonds . . .

VELIE: For a bunch of businessmen, these guys were sure pushovers for that con man Lazarus!

NIKKI: Yes, Sergeant, and the professor would have got away with it, too, if one of them hadn't gone to his hotel, killed him—and stolen the diamonds himself!

ELLERY: Hush, Nikki. Let Dad handle this!

NIKKI: *(Indignantly)* I know, Ellery, but such *deceit,* such—such bloodthirstiness! They're all trying to look so innocent!

VAN HOOTEN: I want back my diamondt! Get it back, I say!

MASSET: *(Bitterly)* Mine, too. Bryce, you are fortunate. Your diamond was left behind. But mine—

BRYCE: But how did he *do* it? I can't understand it!

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INSPECTOR: There's a lot of things I can't understand! Hold it, you four. Ellery, come here a minute.

ELLERY: *(Absently)* Yes, Dad? *(They go to one side.)*

INSPECTOR: Any ideas?

ELLERY: Dad, I'm baffled. Baffled! It's an impossible crime!

INSPECTOR: What's impossible about it? No tricks to *this* murder. All we have to do is find the murderer—

ELLERY: I don't mean the murder, Dad—I mean Lazarus's theft of the diamonds from Kenyon's strongroom! I shan't sleep till I find out how he smuggled them past seven searchers!

INSPECTOR: Hang it, son! This is a murder case, not a puzzle!

ELLERY: This time *you* handle the murder, Dad—I'll take the puzzle. *(Thoughtfully)* I've *got* to figure out how the professor did it!

SCENE 6: *The Queen Apartment, Next Morning*

INSPECTOR: And your check of the alibis, Velie?

VELIE: Whaddaya mean, alibis? Van Hooten an' Masset claimin' they were workin' in Maiden Lane . . . but no one *saw* them! Bryce takin' a walk all by his lonely . . . *(The door opens)* Good mornin', Miss Porter.

INSPECTOR: *(Glumly)* Morning, Nikki.

NIKKI: *(Bouncing in) Good* morning! My, such gloomy faces. No luck on the murder, Inspector Queen?

INSPECTOR: I guess luck will be our only hope of solving it at that, Nikki. Ellery's no help.

NIKKI: He *has* been acting remote. Where is he this morning?

VELIE: Aw, the Master-Mind's in his bedroom poundin' the floor like an expectant papa.

INSPECTOR: Ellery didn't sleep a wink all night, Nikki.

VELIE: If y'ask me, for once in his life the Maestro's stumped. *(The bedroom door opens)* Aha! He enters!

ELLERY: *(Briskly entering)* Morning, everybody!

INSPECTOR: Come on, son—have some breakfast. You must be all tuckered out after last night.

VELIE: Forget it, Mr. Queen. You can't hit the jackpot every time. *(Ellery chuckles.)*

NIKKI: Ellery Queen! You're grinning! Inspector, Sergeant—he *knows* something!

ELLERY: Certainly I know something. I've spent ten sleepless hours figuring it out!

NIKKI: And just what is it you've been puzzling over, Mr. Queen?

ELLERY: How Lazarus managed to smuggle those diamonds past seven searchers. *(The Inspector and Velie groan.)* I've thought of every conceivable way in which he could have stolen the diamonds. Dad—I've solved the puzzle of the theft!

INSPECTOR: *(Sarcastically)* Fine! Now you can start solving the puzzle of the murder.

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ELLERY: *(As if to himself)* Yes, I'm sure I'm right—it's the only possible answer. *I know how those diamonds got out of the strongroom!*

VELIE: Okay, Mr. Queen, so you win the puzzle champeenship of the world. But for cryin' out loud—

INSPECTOR: How about the *murder?* Ellery, we've got to know who *murdered* Lazarus!

ELLERY: *(Absently)* Oh, that? I know that, too!

ELLERY QUEEN *has just said that he knows how the diamonds got out of* KENYON*'s strongroom, and also who murdered* PROFESSOR LAZARUS. *Do you? You can have some additional fun by stopping here and trying to solve the double mystery before* ELLERY *reveals the solution. Naming the criminal is not sufficient, if you play the game fairly. You must get the correct reasoning, too. . . . Now go ahead and read* ELLERY QUEEN*'s own solution to "The Adventure of the Man Who Could Double the Size of Diamonds."*

The Solution

SCENE 7: *The Same, Immediately After*

INSPECTOR: We're losing time, Ellery! Tell me who murdered Lazarus.

ELLERY: To do that, Dad, I'll have to begin with the theft of the diamonds . . .

VELIE: *(Groaning)* There he goes again!

NIKKI: The man with the one-track mind!

ELLERY: *(Gently)* But it's the heart of this case, children. How did Professor Lazarus get those diamonds past seven searchers—the four owners, the two detectives, and the doctor? I saw no light until I asked myself one tremendously simple, one gigantically obvious question: *Was it really Professor Lazarus who took those diamonds out of the strongroom?*

NIKKI: Oh, dear. Oh, *dear!* That's the answer!

ELLERY: Yes, Nikki! A score of facts proved that not only *didn't* Lazarus take those diamonds out, he *couldn't.* It was *impossible* for Lazarus to have smuggled them past the seven men—and you can't find the answer to an impossibility. Therefore *Lazarus* wasn't the thief—someone *else* must have been!

INSPECTOR: But Ellery, only Professor Lazarus entered that strongroom all week—a condition he'd laid down himself before he began working there!

ELLERY: Yes, but is it *true* no one else entered that strongroom? It is *not* true. Because one other person *did* go in there before the diamonds were reported gone—and by his own admission was in there *alone!* And what's more, when he left the office, he knew he wouldn't be searched—because they were all protecting them-

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selves against *Lazarus.* Therefore I knew that the only other person known to have been in the strongroom alone *must* be the thief! And who was that person?

NIKKI: Kenyon! It was Mr. Kenyon! *(Velie ad-libs assent.)*

INSPECTOR: Sure! Kenyon himself told us he returned to his office last night "worried" that something was wrong—that the detectives on guard let him in—that he went into the strongroom *alone,* and the detectives didn't rush in there until he yelled the diamonds were gone!

VELIE: Boy, that's masterful. Kenyon goes in, swipes the ice himself, then comes out, hollers he's been robbed, beats it over to the professor's hotel room, kills the ol' guy, scrams, hides the di'monds, then picks up Dr. Cook an' brings him to you, Mr. Queen, to back up his story about how hard they searched Lazarus!

ELLERY: Yes, and in giving us that story, he brilliantly distracted our attention from himself and directed it towards Lazarus as the thief. Quite a psychologist, Kenyon! One of the cleverest rogues in my experience. He devised a theft of such colossal simplicity that I was nearly taken in by the complicated props.

NIKKI: Then Professsor Lazarus wasn't a confidence man at all! *Could* he double the size of diamonds, Ellery?

ELLERY: *(Laughing)* Well, he didn't, Nikki, so I imagine the poor fellow was just an earnest crank who thought he'd solved one of the riddles of the universe.

NIKKI: Wasn't it foolish of Kenyon to overlook the diamond in the professor's dead hand—Bryce's diamond?

ELLERY: Overlook it! Nikki, Kenyon left that diamond there *purposely.* For the same reason he *killed* Lazarus . . .to clinch the illusion that it was Professor Lazarus who'd stolen the diamonds in the first place.

INSPECTOR: Wait a minute, Ellery. Granting Kenyon was the only one who could have taken the diamonds out of the strongroom, how does that prove he also killed Lazarus?

VELIE: Yeah, why couldn't it 'a' been one o' the other guys who bumped off the professor?

ELLERY: *(Laughing)* Kenyon's magic spell is still on you. Don't you see? The murderer planted one of the four diamonds in the victim's hand. To *leave* a diamond in the victim's hand meant that the murderer had to *have* the diamond. Who had the diamonds? The thief. Therefore the thief must have been the murderer. And who is the only possible thief? Kenyon. Conclusion: Kenyon is the murderer!

NIKKI: Q.—E.—D.!

VELIE: *(Awed)* Gosh! Inspector, why can't *we* figger 'em out so nice an' clean?

INSPECTOR: *(Sadly)* Velie, I've been trying to answer that question ever since I became a father! *(The music comes up.)*

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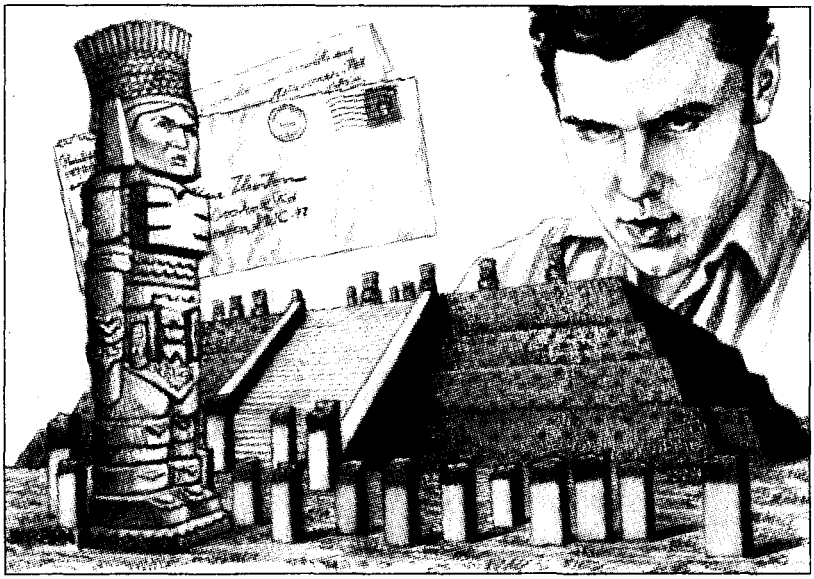

Art by Laurie Harden

In the Time of His Prosperity

by Ruth Rendell
writing as Barbara Vine

The pyramid was separated from the lawn by a sheet of water, its reflection doubling it, adding a triangle to a triangle, with nothing between but a long, thin tongue of green. But while the pyramid was still as a rock, its image trembled when a breeze touched the water and dimpled the surface. Behind were trees, a dense screen of them, between the grey, step-sided stone temple and the sky.

Temple was Paul Hazlitt's word for it. Even then he called it that. It was four-sided, and each side took the form of a flight of nine deep steps. On the side facing him, the steps were bisected by a staircase, steep and composed of many treads, which led up to a stone house on the top, a mausoleum or an altar. It looked very old, as if it had stood there since ancient times, yet there was no moss on its northern aspect and no lichen on its roof.

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He gazed at the reality and at its quivering silvery image, and saw what he had not at first noticed, two little islands in the lake, one with a tree growing on it, one bare and green. A small rowing boat was moored at the nearer shore. The temple's reflection shook with sudden violence as a gust of wind snatched at it. Paul exclaimed aloud. The man who was to employ him, the man on whose account he was there, said, "If the pyramid of Tezcatlipoca impresses you, come into the house and I will show you wonders."

Ruth Rendell/Barbara Vine is one of Great Britain's most illustrious crime writers. This story was one of twelve commissioned by Penguin Books to mark its 60th anniversary in 1995. It has never before appeared in print in the U.S. All of the other contributors to the boxed set of individually bound stories were mainstream writers such as Muriel Spark and John Updike. ¶

All this I knew from the first, because it is recorded in Paul's diary, though to call it a diary is to aggrandize it. It was small and thin, with a space three inches by one-and-a-half allotted for each day. The account of Paul's arrival at Mandate Benedict is the longest entry, one of only three to hold more than the bare details of an appointment or a comment on the weather.

It seems to have been the first he ever kept, this black, leather-bound book for the year 1963. My father gave it to him because it was one of seven that had come in the post that Christmas. A diary for me, a diary for each of my brothers. I don't know what happened to the rest except for the one that went to Paul. I remember his effusive thanks, his disproportionate pleasure, but he was like that, ardent, enraptured by small things. He had come down from Oxford six months before and was living with us in London, looking for a job.

His grandmother died about that time. He went up north and was with her for a week before her death. She was the last close relative he had, for his parents were long dead, and we were distant enough, my father his second cousin and the rest of us, of course, removed even further. That winter he settled down with us and became part of our family.

He had an art-history degree and was supposed to be clever. I thought he was the most beautiful man I had ever seen. "Handsome, not beautiful," my mother said. "A man can't be beautiful." But Paul was. His face had the sweetness of a girl's and the firm regularity of a man's. He was dark and his eyes were dark blue. He was tall and slender and straight-backed, but the most remarkable thing about his appearance—and I remember this clearly after

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what is, after all, quite a long time—was its flawlessness.

It sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? This is a man of twenty-two I am talking about. Perhaps it is tasteless to quote this now, but I must. I must use those words and say that he was "without a single corporal blemish." Of course, I don't precisely know this, I never saw him totally naked, but I did see him in swimming trunks one day when we all went to the pool, and I watched him for a long time as, after coming out of the water, he lay on a towel in the sun. There were no scars on his body. That in itself is not unusual—there is none on mine—but Paul had no moles, either, not one.

These days he could have worked as a model, as a way of making a living before something more suited to his gifts came along. His grandmother had left him nothing. If there had been any insurance money from his parents' deaths, it was all gone by then. But in those days modelling was for girls to do, not men. And Paul seemed unaware of his looks. I never saw him glance covertly into a mirror; he took no special trouble over his appearance.

He had a beautiful speaking voice. I would have liked him to read aloud to me but I lacked the courage to ask him. Sometimes he played our Bechstein, though he always denied his ability when we praised him, and he never sat down at the piano without first being asked or asking permission. His manners were gentle. I never saw him lose his temper.

I have made him out a paragon, but this he was not, as we were all soon to realize. Even then we knew he was secretive, carefully keeping to himself what he did when out of our sight, telling us he was going out but not where he was going. He was secretive and a little sly, but he was not very subtle about it. Even then I understood that he expected people to believe whatever he told them. I suppose he was naive. Perhaps young people still were at that time, for isn't 1963 called the year when sex was discovered? He called my parents "Uncle" and "Auntie." If he never actually used adjectives like "ripping" and "super," I once heard him say after some outing or gathering that he had had a smashing time. The diary—I had better call it that—has the entry for 10 February, "Fantastic Sunday lunch at Auntie Joan's!" and for 8 March, "A real job offer, can't believe my luck!" He was liberal throughout with that mark of exclamation journalists call the "screamer." You could hear it in his speech, too, in his enthusiasms and his fervour.

But the job, I must get back to that. He already had one, of sorts, in a gallery in Vigo Street, where he was paid a little if he sold a painting and nothing if he did not. For all that, my father said that what Declan Roche did was unethical, to go into the Peacock Gallery and pretend to buy a picture when his true purpose was to tempt away an employee. Tempt him first with an invitation to dine, for after hum-ing and ha-ing over this painting (of a jaguar

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hunt somewhere in Central America) and eyeing Paul openly all the while, Roche had asked him to have dinner with him that evening. Even I, and I was six years younger than Paul, would have seen through that one. But in the event I would have been wrong, for Roche appeared as innocent as Paul himself, and more open.

The offer he made was genuine and was enticing enough: For making an inventory of certain artefacts Paul would receive a real salary, as much as the curator of the Peacock was paid, and perquisites that seemed unbelievable: a flat, the use of a car. The disadvantage was that the contract was for only one year, from April to April, but, as my mother said, it might well be extended if Paul "gave satisfaction."

That expression of hers, absurd, with a faintly lewd connotation, yet old-fashioned, stuck in my mind to surface again years later when I met Rosie Thornton. To make me ask myself, did he give satisfaction? And what kind of satisfaction might that have been?

But it was a long time before I asked those questions, before any speculations were made about Paul except the aggrieved kind: Why did he do it? What made him change? For we were offended. We were hurt. My father had given him the hospitality of his house for months, my mother had fed him, my brothers had befriended him, and as for me—I suppose I had had a powerful teenage crush on him. And he had repaid us by writing my father two short letters and by fleeing to Mexico as soon as his contract with Roche came to an end.

Instead of the phone call to tell us he was leaving, instead of the postcard, came the diary. Paul had left it behind at Mandate House and Roche had sent it on. His accompanying letter presupposed that we knew where Paul was and when he had gone, but it also made excuses for his former employee. It was only natural, Roche wrote, that Paul, after his experience at Mandate House and with a year's salary of which he had spent very little, should wish to go off and see the remains of the Aztec civilization for himself.

"He might have let us know," my mother said.

And my father spoke those words that are some of the saddest in the language. "We were mistaken in him."

It seemed so unlike Paul. Had the warmth all been a sham, then? Under the gentle manners and the sweetness, for there is no other word for it, under the impetuous delight taken in quite ordinary things, the bubbling fervour and the simple joy, had there been a cynical opportunist who used us and cast us aside when our usefulness was over? That kind of thing is always hard to take, no less hard when you are middle-aged than when you are as young as I was. We want gratitude, even when we say we don't expect it.

My parents ignored the diary. Why send it to them? To keep it for a man who might come back one day or might not? In any case,

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they wouldn't have dreamt of reading it. They wouldn't have read anyone's diary. I was less honourable. One day I found it on my father's desk, and it was then that I came upon that longest entry, the one about the pyramid reflected in the lake and Roche promising to show Paul wonders. I was seventeen by then and I should have known better, but I succumbed to temptation. I found the letter written to my father in May and the letter written in August and I read those, too. My excuse must be that I had been in love, in the throes of first love, and rejection made me sore at heart.

The only other entries in the diary that were more than bare memoranda were devoted to descriptions of the objects in Roche's house. Some of the objects, that is, for as Paul points out at once, the collection was vast, it filled whole big rooms of this big house, priceless artefacts crowded or even tumbled together like junk in an attic. It was his task to set them in some sort of order, to catalogue them, to arrange them. In the first letter he wrote to my father he lists some of them more precisely: the fifteenth-century skull carved from rock crystal—"like glass, like contemporary work in glass"—the figurine of the Goddess of the Jade Petticoat, the jade plaques, the carved yoke that was an accoutrement of Tezcatlipoca, God of the Smoking Mirror, the clay cups, the palmate stone of the sacrificed man. But above all he names the greatest of Roche's wonders, the Mandate Codex.

It meant nothing to me then. This was years before I married Michael and came to live here at this university and learned from my husband something about those things. I barely knew what a codex was and would very likely have defined the word as meaning "cipher" or "system." I skimmed through what Paul said about it and passed on to his trivial daily entries: "Rained all day," "Started to learn Nahuatl!," "Spanish improving," "Went into Exeter with D.R. and. Andrew," "Hair quite long! As fashion decrees!" "Rain has come back." In the August letter are more details of the collection, identified and specified in his catalogue. His handwriting was beautiful, too, small but not too small, shapely, mature, a fit vehicle to describe the ceramic flutes, the mantles of agave fibre, a feathered serpent in stone, a monkey vase in obsidian. And he was learning the flute, something apparently he had always wanted to do, for unfortunately there was no piano in Mandate House, and he must have music. His Spanish teacher, Rafael, was also a virtuoso on the flute. Everyone was tremendously nice to him, it was not a place in which to be lonely, he was scarcely if ever alone . . .

No more letters came, not even a postcard. The nearest we got to news of Paul, and it was not very near, was a profile of Declan Roche that appeared in a Sunday newspaper. He was sixty-five then, unmarried, though he had had three wives, from the last of whom he was divorced in 1960. Paul was mentioned as the "young

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art historian" who had set Roche's "fabulous collection of Inca antiquities"—even in those days I knew they had got that wrong—in the order in which it could be seen at the present time.

Five or six years later Roche died. His obituary described him as a millionaire, a traveller in Central America, and a collector of works of Mesoamerican art that were the envy of museums worldwide. He had died of natural causes. His body was found by his butler Andrew Freeman on the lowest of the nine steep steps that formed the southern aspect of a pyramid in his garden at Mandate Benedict, South Devon. This pyramid was a copy, the writer of the obituary said, of the temple of the God of the Smoking Mirror at Tenochtitlán in the Templo Mayor Precinct in Mexico. I wished I could see a picture of it. I thought of its original as the principal wonder Paul had gone there to see. In my mind I held confused images of snakes with feathers, paintings of storm gods and fire gods, stone faces, and spotted cats, and I supposed he had gone there to see them, too.

The next thing I read about Roche was that, after bequests to his secretary, Nigel Coombs, his valet, Peter Smith, and Andrew Freeman, he had left everything he possessed to the British Museum, including the Mandate Codex. It was there, in the Mexican Room, that I saw the codex, some fifteen years after I had last seen Paul Hazlitt. And I saw it in the company of the woman who had been his girlfriend.

The Aztecs (I now know) made paper from tree bark pressed into sheets and coated with white pigment. They had no alphabet, no writing, so they set down their ceremonies, their mythology, and their terrible blood rites in glyphs: small, sinister, and beautiful pictures in scarlet and gold, black and green and crimson, gods and men and priests, serpents and eagles and jaguars, flutes and torches and flowers. The most famous of these books or codices, according to Michael, is probably the Codex Florentinus in Florence. This one, which had been Roche's, had been hidden by a priest of Tezcatlipoca in, of all places, a recess behind the altar of a Christian church. An earthquake had brought it to light and its discoverer had sold it to Roche, reprehensibly, certainly illegally, for an undisclosed sum. It was a treasure. Even to those, like me, who knew nothing of the mythology, the ritual, or the history, it was exquisite.

"Strange that a people who were so cruel could make such beautiful things," Rosie Thornton said.

"It happens," I said, "and not just in Mexico."

She had asked me to meet her there. My father had had a letter from her in which she said she was in search of Paul. She had tried old college friends of his, an old school friend, his grandmother's neighbours, all in vain. My parents could be of no more help to her than those others, but she left them a phone number in case they

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heard of anyone who might know, in case anything came up.

Curiosity impelled me to phone her and make that appointment.

Had she been his girlfriend in the particular sense in which this differs from a mere friend? Strangely enough, I don't know. Rosie Thornton never really said, only that they knew each other because Paul's grandmother and her mother were friends. They had known each other since they were children. She gave a sad smile when she said that, not at all surprised that my parents had never heard of her, taking Paul's concealment of her existence for granted. I suppose that in her way she was as noncommittal as he, though not so secretive as to keep his letters to herself. Not that there was anything in them that the whole world might not have seen, not a word of love, no reference to any intimacy. She showed them to me on the following day in her flat in Gower Street.

"I thought he'd just dropped me," she said. "But when my mother died and I tried to get in touch with him and couldn't, that worried me. He'd been fond of my mother and I knew he'd want to know. I tried everyone. And now I've met you, and you say he's never been in touch with any of you, I don't know what to think."

The first letter she had from Paul seemed to have been written on the same day in August as the one to my father. It had much the same information in it, details of the flutes, the agave mantle, the monkey vase, and a description of Rafael, his flute teacher, who was also teaching him Spanish and Nahuatl.

"What's Nahuatl?" I said.

"The language those people spoke. I don't know why he had to learn anything. He didn't go to Mandate to learn but to make an inventory."

The life he led was more luxurious than anything he had previously known. Rather ingenuously, he described his private bathroom. Every evening he and Roche sat down to a four-course dinner with nine feet of mahogany table between them, Roche at the head and he at the foot. Roche's servants waited on him as if he were more honoured a guest than he had any right to be.

That was in August. In his December letter he described the house and the grounds and gave a detailed picture of the Pyramid of Tezcatlipoca. Roche, he said, had had it built five years before from Dartmoor granite. He was an eccentric, self-made and an autodidact, obsessed with what he had seen on his travels in Central America, a fanatic about pre-Hispanic history, ignorant yet passionate, totally involved with Aztec and Mayan mythology. "It wouldn't be too far-fetched," Paul wrote, "to say he believes in those gods himself! In some of the cults and rituals he certainly believes. Would you credit it that I have seen him perform a ritual to make it rain and another that's supposed to make his apple trees bear fruit? He is quite crazy! But as kind to me as can be.

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Nothing is too much trouble for him and his staff to do for me."

I asked her if she had written back.

"I wrote five letters in all. Not as long as his and, of course, without as much interesting stuff in them. Strange that, really, because I was the one who was living in London, in the centre of things, and he was in this small village out in the sticks, seeing the same people every day. But his letters were full of beauty and excitement, and mine—well, I never seemed to have anything to say. I used to try to find things to tell him. I remember in one letter I asked him how long his hair was. He'd said he was growing his hair, that Roche had asked him to grow it."

"Asked him to grow his hair? But why?"

"Something about making himself look like Tezcatlipoca. Those people that made the Codex, they dressed up young men to look like the god and that meant having long hair."

"Do you think Roche was . . . ?"

"Interested in him sexually? No, I don't think so. You'll see why not if you read the rest."

He wrote that he never went out alone. If ever he thought of taking a walk or driving into the village or into Exeter, Roche or one of the staff, Andrew or Peter, always said they would come, too. He was never alone, except at night. This was not a complaint, far from it, he was very happy, but it sometimes struck him as unusual, that was all.

Another strange thing was that there were very few books in the house, no fiction, no works of reference. A Spanish dictionary, yes, and a Nahuatl dictionary, and various art books of collections in museums that were of help in his cataloguing, but that was all. It was disappointing because he would have liked to read about the ceremonies Roche spoke of. He would have liked to learn more about that culture.

Sometimes he thought he was denied information that could easily have been obtained, but this, he feared, was through ignorance. He suspected Roche—though it seemed disloyal to say so—of not fully knowing his subject, of not always being as accurate about some of these rituals and customs as a trained scholar would have been.

"Well, it will all be over in April," he wrote, "and then I will have plenty of chances to be lonely, no doubt! When my contract comes to an end at Easter I will be a free man." He added, oddly, "The truth is that I don't always feel quite free."

The next letter to Rosie was sent in March. I read a few lines, set it down, and looked at her.

"What does he mean about the girls?"

"It's all there. I don't know any more than you do." She took her eyes from my face. "I wasn't in love with him and he wasn't in love with me. I suppose he thought it was all right to write like that to

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me—about things like that, I mean. I don't think I much liked it at the time. No woman would. But Paul was naive, wasn't he? He had terrific blind spots. Perhaps he felt he had to write to someone and there was no one else." She said quickly, as if she wanted to get it said before thinking too much about it, "Do you think he was a prisoner?"

"In Devon? In nineteen sixty-four?"

"There was no phone, you know. Roche didn't have a phone."

The staff at Mandate House was joined by four girls, Paul wrote. Up till then there had been no women—it was months, nearly a year, since he had spoken to a woman apart from shop assistants. Roche introduced one of these girls to him "in a special way!" She was to be his companion; he must be starved of female company. "Look on her as your girlfriend," Roche said. Writing about it to Rosie, Paul followed this piece of reported speech with three exclamation marks, but whether he took Roche up on this offer he omits to say.

After two more days a second girl showed an interest in him. One night she came to the door of the flat he had in a wing of the house and, when he let her in, went into his bedroom. That was all he said, that the girl he called Xilonan showed an interest in him, tapped on his door, and came into his bedroom. The other girls were not mentioned, and he went into no further details. There was nothing about his relations with one or all of these women, nothing more about "female company" or special kinds of companionship.

Instead, he went on to write about an Easter celebration Roche was arranging. It was to coincide with the termination of Paul's contract and would centre on a ceremony, a rite that the Aztecs performed to ensure a good summer. No doubt, Roche said, he would fail to get the details right, but he would like to perform it as best he could with the help of Andrew, Peter, Nigel, and the girls—and, of course, Paul. At worst it would rain and the whole thing have to be called off, at best it would be a very beautiful ceremony and perhaps something that could in future be performed as part of a festival. He even envisaged an annual event at Mandate House, to be attended either by the public or else by specially invited guests.

"He asked me what was I meaning to do after Easter. Go to Mexico, I said. Go and see my relatives in London first and then off to Mexico City. And what do you think he did? Next day he presented me with an air ticket! A bonus, he said, for what I'd done over and above the call of duty.

"We do the ritual on Easter Monday. They dress me up and the girls—he calls them my wives!—take formal leave of me, I climb up the steps of the temple and break a couple of ceramic flutes and no doubt Roche chants some mantra or rubric, and that's it. Bob's your uncle! If all goes according to plan and it works, the

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sun will never stop shining! I'll send you a postcard from Aztec-land. With love, Paul."

"He never did," Rosie said, "but people don't, do they, no matter what they say? And they disappear from one's life—but as utterly as that? From everyone's life?"

I asked her what she meant to do.

"What can I do? Worry for a while, I suppose, and then—I don't know."

Paul Hazlitt was probably in Mexico still, or living in Australia, or a mile or two from us in London, married, with children. I told her that. And, no, it was not surprising that he had failed ever to get in touch. We all know how we feel about those we have lost contact with over a long period of time. We are afraid to break the silence, make the tentative approach, lest they are still sore, still hurt, and liable to lash back vindictively.

Whatever she said, I think she must have loved him, for her face was full of woe. But in time, no doubt, she forgot him, as I did. I met a man and fell in love and married him. I married a man who knew as a professional what Paul's employer knew only as a dilettante. But Michael is no Declan Roche. For one thing, he has no money, or only what he earns teaching Latin American Studies at this university in the Midwest where we live, and the culture of the Aztecs is not his special subject. But he does, of course, know a good deal about them, as he does about all the ancient Mexica groups, and our house is full of books on Mesoamerica.

The passage I am going to quote in a minute came not from one of them but is Michael's own translation from the Spanish of a sixteenth-century friar. The friar must have interpreted one of the codices, perhaps even that which came into Roche's possession, and been a devout religious who saw the gods of Mexico as demons and their customs as barbaric. Michael's own view is rather different, dispassionate but inquisitive.

"The whole notion of men impersonating gods is fascinating," he says. "Of men *being* gods for a while. They made bloodless war, you see, and took captives, choosing the most beautiful, 'without a single corporal blemish,' to be the god. They taught him good manners and reverenced him."

"But why?"

For answer he gave me this paper. He intends to use it in a book he is writing, just as he will use several other expositions of Aztec practices. Of course, I have told him about Paul and Roche and Mandate Benedict, but I have noticed an uncharacteristic lack of interest, due perhaps to Roche's amateur status. Michael is an academic and academics are always like that, distrustful and even contemptuous of the likes of Declan Roche. It was lucky, is his only comment, that the Mandate Codex came to no harm while in his hands.

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All there is left for me to say is that I very much doubt if any harm came to my second cousin once removed, Paul Hazlitt. I shall not be at all surprised if he turns up here one day at a symposium or to give a course of lectures on, say, Art in the Enlightenment or From Phidias to Giacometti. I would have paid no attention to the following translation but for the mention of the four women, one being named Xilonan, and the long hair. . . .

Twenty days before the feast, they removed the attire in which until then he had made penance, washing off the paint which he was used to wear. And they married him to four damsels, with whom he had conversation those twenty days that remained. They cut his hair in the way that was used by the captains and tied it in a little knot above his head. With a strange ribbon they tied to his hair two hangings with their decorations made from feathers and gold and rabbit skin, very strange, which they called aztxelli. *The four damsels whom they gave him as his women were also raised with great discernment. To that end they named them after four goddesses: one was called Xochiquetzal; another, Xilonan; the third, Atlatonan; and the fourth, Huixtocihuatl.*

Five days before reaching the feast, they honoured this youth like a god. The court followed him and, all richly attired, held solemn feasts and banquets. On the first day they fêted him in the ward known as Tecanman; the second in the ward where they kept the statue of Tezcatlipoca; the third on the little hill which they call Tepetzinco, which is in the lake; the fourth, on another island also in the lake called Tepepulco.

This fourth feast ended, they put him into a canoe in which the lord was accustomed to travel, covered with its own awning, and with him his women who consoled him. And leaving Tepepulco, they navigated towards a place called Tlapitzahuayan, which is near the road to Itzapalapa, that goes towards Chalco, where is a little mound called Acaquilpan or Cahualtepec. In this place his four women left him and all the rest and returned to the city. He was accompanied only by the pages who had attended him throughout the year.

They took him to a small cu *or temple, poorly adorned, which was at the side of the road outside the settlement, about a league distant from the city. He himself ascended the steps of the temple, and on the first level he broke into pieces one of the flutes which he had played in the time of his prosperity, and on the second level he broke another, and thus he went breaking them all, climbing the steps.*

At the top of the cu *the satraps were waiting. They cast him on the stone, and, holding him by the arms and feet and head, thrown as he was back on the altar, he who had the obsidian knife passed it through his chest with one great slash. Into the opening thus made, the satrap put in his hand, and wrenching out his heart, offered it to the Sun.* ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

A DEADLY JOKE

by Richard Macker

Translated from the Norwegian by Jorunn and Michael Fergus

Karl Rynndal moved a black rook. Then he leaned back and stared at Olav Morvik with a triumphant expression on his grizzled, sunburnt face.

"Just put on your thinking cap, if you have one," he said with some irony. "It's checkmate again."

Olav Morvik was shorter and had a smaller build than Rynndal. His hair was thinner, his beard lighter and sparser. His glance remained fixed on the pieces on the board, as if he simply would not acknowledge yet one more defeat.

"A Deadly Joke" was first published as the title story in a collection in 1986, the year the pseudonymous Richard Macker turned fifty. Norway's largest publishing house, Aschehoug, gathered his best crime stories for the occasion. The same year the story was filmed by NRK (Norway's premier TV station) and shown at the Easter holidays. A new encyclopedia says: "as a short story writer he (Macker) is among the very best of newer Norwegian crime writers."

"Now you have just experienced an example of the Staunton attack," said Rynndal pedantically. "Named after the great English grand master Howard Staunton."

"He is of absolutely no interest to me," said Morvik with irritation.

"No, quite. You take no interest in the theory of the game or its history, so you are doomed to lose. You know nothing of Howard Staunton. Or of José Capablanca, Aron Nimzowitsch, Tigran Petrosjan, or any of the other great grand masters. But I have made an intense study of how they played. Maybe you knew that?"

"All I know is that you have a pretty big mouth," said Morvik in annoyance, as he swept the pieces from the board in one restless move. Then he added, "If you are so bloody good, why don't you enter the Norwegian championships, then?"

The question, and Morvik's irritation, seemed to amuse Rynndal.

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"I'm afraid I regard myself as too good. All these competitions are like flypaper for the mediocre. Have you ever seen the most beautiful women entering a beauty competition? No, never. Have you ever seen the most intelligent and able people in this country taking part in politics or playing competition chess? No, never. Those who belong to the elite have enough to do manning the pumps and keeping the ship afloat, whilst the mediocrities do their best to sink it, or concern themselves with issues of no value to society."

A dark shadow crossed Olav Morvik's face.

"This megalomania is really beginning to get on my nerves, Karl. And you're becoming worse. I'm seriously concerned about how it is all going to end up for you."

Rynndal opened his mouth and uttered an almost soundless laugh. His light blue eyes shone.

"You're a bad loser, Olav," he said. "But let us have another game so that you get a chance to prove me wrong."

"No, thanks."

"Well, it's understandable. Anyone can give up after six defeats in a row."

Morvik said nothing. All that could be heard was the crackling from the fireplace and the howling of the wind outside. They had been confined to that little cabin by the weather for more than twenty-four hours and had long since begun to grate on each other's nerves.

They were clad in ski stockings, wind-proof trousers, and thick woollen sweaters. On the table between them stood coffee cups, a bottle of whiskey, and the chessboard. On a plate lay a pile of sliced lamb sausage and some slices of bread with a thick layer of butter. They had what they needed, and they still had another week of their Easter vacation. They had worked out that they could cover a distance of 300 kilometers on skis in the course of ten days. The trip had been well planned, and the cabin they were in now belonged to a colleague of Rynndal's. For the first few days, everything had gone as planned, but now it seemed as if the weather was going to stop them for good.

Morvik folded the chessboard and put it away. "We could take a round of hard poker," he said gruffly.

"We've played poker twice as long as we have played chess."

"Not hard poker."

Rynndal stared at Morvik with his shining eyes. And then he laughed again. "I don't play hard poker with civil servants of limited means," he said. "I don't have the heart to."

"No, indeed. You prefer to play when you are a hundred percent sure of winning, is that it?"

Morvik had placed all the chess pieces in the box and put the lid on and rattled it as if to emphasize his exasperation. Rynndal watched him with a smile. Then he yawned and drummed his fin-

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gers on the table. Suddenly he got up, went to a bookshelf, and leafed through some books that were there.

"Well, my goodness, what a collection of dirty books," he said after a while. "And I thought my colleague had at least a modicum of intellect. I see I am going to have to revise my opinion. There is absolutely nothing here with which to pass the time in a sensible fashion, apart from the chess set. Such a pity that you are so completely hopeless in that department, too, Olav."

Morvik still had that gruff expression on his face. "If you are so extremely bored," he said, "you could lie down in your sleeping bag and sing yourself a lullaby. In fact, the less I see of your arrogant face, the better it is for me."

Rynndal wasn't smiling anymore. He had unlocked a corner cupboard and was going through the shelves inside. Morvik got up and put some birch logs on the fire. When he had sat down again, Rynndal had positioned himself in the chair right opposite him. He was staring and his voice had taken on a brittle, metallic quality.

"I think it's time I made you aware of a couple of essential facts," he said. "First and foremost I want to emphasise that I left secondary school with absolutely top marks. You should also know that I then took my medical degree with honors and that my doctoral dissertation on hormonal functions in the adrenal glands brought me a research award which is very highly regarded. To put it briefly, as a person I count for a great deal. But what about you? Who are you? A typical mediocrity, with a pitiful degree in economics and some mindless function in the government bureaucracy."

Morvik's mouth fell open. A distinct reddening replaced the tan on his cheeks. "Things have really gone further than I had imagined, Karl," he said, slowly shaking his head. "Your conceit has completely gone to your head."

"It's not conceit but the truth."

Morvik was silent for a bit, and looked as if he wished himself a thousand miles away from this place. "That one should be subjected to this!" He sighed. "Here we set off on a trip in all friendliness, and then—"

Rynndal interrupted him in a cold, cutting voice. "Friendliness. Are you really using that word, Olav? You who from the very beginning have been planning to take my life?"

"Take your life? What is it you are saying, man?" Morvik had raised himself, shaking with irritation.

"Sit down," said Rynndal, without raising his voice. "Just take it completely easy. I know what you are hatching. But you will get nowhere, because I have this."

He stuck his hand into the pocket of his wind-proof trousers and fished out a pistol.

"I'm not stupid, Olav. I took my own precautions when I understood what you were planning."

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Morvik sank slowly back into his chair, as if he was wanting to waken from a bad dream. "Your mind must be going. You must be raving mad."

"It's either you or me, Olav."

"Me or you—What sort of bullshit is this?"

"It's a matter of life. For me or you. It's as simple as that."

Morvik broke into a cold sweat. "Listen, Karl," he said hoarsely, "have you forgotten what we agreed on for this trip? We've been on many trips together, and we've discovered that we can test our powers against the elements. Yesterday we skied fifty kilometers in bad weather. You are still overtired, and you need a lot of sleep. Give me that toy gun, and I'll forget what you said."

Suddenly a deafening shot rang out from the pistol. The bullet went into the fireplace and ricocheted off the stone wall with a whine. Then came a laugh from Rynndal, dry and sarcastic. "Toy gun, did you say?"

Morvik sat bunched up in shock. And his breath began to heave. "You're completely crazy."

"I've never felt more sane."

They were silent for a bit. Then Morvik drew a quivering hand across his face. "And why would I want to kill you?"

"Because of Greta."

"Greta, your wife?!"

"Yes."

"What in God's name have I got to do with her?"

"You're having an affair with her."

"I'm having an affair with Greta? It's beyond me how you can come up with such a lunatic accusation. I've never been anywhere near her."

"Don't give me your lies."

Morvik sat open-mouthed. Then he laughed nervously. "But don't you hear what I say! I've never touched her. She's not my type. And I am definitely not hers, either. The fact that she married you reveals her dubious taste in men."

"Don't try to wriggle out of it with your untruths, Olav. Just sit quietly and listen to an interesting little story from life. About Otto Hall. Surely you remember him?"

Morvik didn't reply. He just sat there hunched up with anxiety and anger.

"Sure," continued Rynndal lingeringly. "Otto Hall is a mutual friend of ours from childhood. I know you remember him. Alas, he died twenty years ago. At that time, we were both studying medicine and he was going out with Greta Wikan, as she was called then. I was very much in love with her and their relationship was, to put it mildly, inconvenient for me. I had to do something."

"What do you mean, 'something' . . . ?"

"Yes, and as you will recall, Otto was a keen mountaineer. One

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day he was going to tackle a precipice on the training grounds at Bergkollen. Unfortunately he never made it to the top. But he came down, all right, twenty meters straight down. I knew that he was going to try this precipice, and I put a sedative in his thermos flask just before he was to set out."

"So you . . . murdered him," whispered Morvik.

"Rather we should say that I made my move in chess and defeated him."

Morvik leaned forward, his hands cupped over his knees. "And you sit there and admit it openly. What do you think Greta will say when she gets to know this? And what do you think the police will say?"

"Don't be funny, Olav. You know that neither Greta nor the police will get to know our little secret."

"So you are thinking of killing me, too?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I've already explained that."

"You've got no proof for your crazy accusations. I've already told you I've had nothing to do with Greta. Are you going to kill an innocent man in cold blood?"

"She has whispered your name in her sleep several times: 'Olav, oh, Olav,' she whispers. That is proof enough for me. That and this trip you convinced me to come on."

"Is that your only evidence? There are thousands of men called Olav."

"You are the only one in our circle of acquaintances with that name. That's enough for me."

"You're off your head."

"And you are repeating yourself."

Morvik's glance began to roam, and he seemed to be in a panic. "Fair enough. You can shoot me. So go ahead and shoot me. You will have problems explaining everything to the police afterwards when they find a bullet-riddled corpse. I can assure you that you will have problems."

Rynndal smiled. "Your thinking is as naive as ever, Olav. You are going to die, but afterwards no one will suspect me of murder. I'll give you two choices. You can go out of the cabin as you are and start walking. If you go out you are not taking your rucksack, your skis, or the rest of your clothes. You'll manage for twenty minutes. Yes, maybe half an hour with your physique. And then that's it."

"And if I choose to remain here?"

"The result will be the same. First of all you will fall asleep. Then I can put you outside so that you freeze to death. Or I can put you in your sleeping bag in the room you sleep in and arrange for a fire in your sleeping bag. Everyone knows you are a heavy smoker. Either outcome will produce easily explainable results. No one will ever accuse me. We are known to be the best of friends."

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"But why should I fall asleep? Maybe you will do so before me."

"No, because you have already taken a sleeping pill."

"What?"

"Yes, while you were stoking the fire, I put some easily dissolved sleeping pills into your coffee, and you have drunk it all up. Are you maybe beginning to feel a little drowsy?"

Morvik had gotten up. "You're . . . lying," he said inarticulately.

"Think what you like."

Beads of sweat ran down Morvik's face. "Listen, Karl," he said with a failing voice, "I've never had anything to do with Greta. I swear it."

"You are wasting your time."

Morvik crossed the floor slowly and went out into the passageway. "I choose to die outdoors," he said hoarsely. "I refuse to stay one second more under the same roof as a mad executioner like you."

He hesitated a little before opening the door. The blizzard and the icy wind blew in over him from the darkness outside. He stood there a moment, pale and swaying. He took a step out into the deep snow, and at the same moment he heard Rynndal's sarcastic laughter right behind him.

"My dear Olav, you are taking me seriously. Don't you see that this was a joke? Close the door again before we both freeze to death."

Morvik turned round slowly. It looked as if he was going to faint. He stumbled in, pulled the door closed behind him, and sank down onto a stool.

"Joke," he muttered, half choking. "Do you call that a . . . joke?"

"Sure. Are you disappointed that it is not for real, maybe?"

"But what about the sleeping pills?"

"That was a mere bluff, of course."

"And the pistol?"

"I found it in the corner with a whole packet of ammunition. We can be sure that that colleague of mine is careless with his weapons. But he shoots in competitions, and usually trains up here in the mountains. Here is the pistol. I only put one cartridge in the barrel. The magazine is empty."

Morvik seemed still completely paralyzed. With a shaking hand he grasped the gun. Then he got up and took a step forward with raised fist. It seemed as if he was going to strike Rynndal a blow in the face. "This time you have gone too far," he said, blazing with anger.

"But I was provoked into doing it. You have repeatedly accused me of being a megalomaniac. And you know that is a form of madness. I had every reason to play a trick on you."

"Idiot!"

"But listen, Olav, why are you reacting in this way? If anyone here should be offended, it should be me. The fact that you fell for that spoof showed that you have a disappointing lack of confidence in me. You must have realised that it was one great bluff.

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Would I ever go round thinking that Greta, who loves me more than life itself, would betray me with you? And you actually thought that I had murdered my old friend Otto Hall. And that I would kill you? A murderer? Me? No, Olav, it is I who should be offended. You have wounded me deeply."

"Shut your mouth! I could have given you a real beating for that," said Morvik, quivering.

"That you could hardly have done. I'm bigger and stronger than you."

Morvik put the pistol on the table. "You can regard our friendship as finished as of tonight," he said bitterly.

"But my dear Olav. This was only a somewhat advanced form of party game. A bit rough at the edges, perhaps. But amusing to look back on, is it not? Our friendship can surely take a small knock?"

Morvik cast him a cool glance, and made his way to the room where he had his sleeping bag. But suddenly he stopped and pricked up his ears. Rynndal did the same.

There was something like a wail from outside, and it wasn't the wind, either. The sound grew louder and suddenly there was a fearsome banging on the door. Someone was screaming out there.

"What in God's name . . . Someone is coming." Morvik and Rynndal both started speaking at the same time. At the same instant the door burst open and in came a frozen figure covered in snow, with an anorak hood pulled down over the head. It was a man in his thirties.

"Help me," he groaned. "Help me before I freeze to death." He sank where he was and lay still on the floor.

After half an hour, the frozen and exhausted man began to come to. They had put him beside the fire and gotten some coffee into him together with a sip of brandy. He said that he worked as a shop assistant in the local village shop, and his job at Easter was to transport goods by snow scooter to people vacationing in holiday cabins in the mountains. But in the bad weather he had lost the track and was literally out in the wilds. And then his snow scooter had failed.

"Ten minutes more out there and I'd have been a dead man," he muttered.

The three men sat and chatted. The newcomer was taciturn, and stuttered in the beginning, but as time went by, the lively Rynndal got him to thaw out. Morvik did not say much. Almost all of the time Morvik sat and stared at Rynndal with a bitter expression on his face, as if he would never forget the macabre joke he had just been subjected to. Before he went to bed, he took out his little pocket radio from his rucksack.

"The weather will have to get better for me to get away from this place," he muttered to himself as he snuggled down into his sleeping bag.

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Reception was very poor, but not so bad that he could not pick up the weather-forecast broadcast together with the midnight news. The weather would clear up soon.

"Excellent," muttered Morvik. Then he pricked up his ears as the announcer read out a special news item. When Morvik had heard it, he switched off the radio, sat up, and stared rigidly ahead. Then he crept out of his sleeping bag again. He could still hear the two men talking in there, and he gathered that Rynndal had generously given his room to the newcomer.

When everything was still, Morvik carefully opened the door. Rynndal was lying on a sofa in the living room, deep in his sleeping bag. He was already asleep. Morvik leant over him and wakened him. Rynndal blinked and wanted to say something, but Morvik told him to be quiet.

"Listen to me now," he whispered. "There was just an extra item on the news on the radio. The police are looking for a tall, fair, powerful man who beat to death the cashier at Åslien Mountain Hotel and disappeared with thirty thousand kroner,* and a snow scooter. The hotel is not far from here."

"My dear Olav," Rynndal said evenly, "you have a charmingly naive way of getting your own back! In fact, I really feel sorry for you."

"But don't you hear what I am saying? We must do something. Don't you get it?"

Rynndal shook his head and gave an ironic smile. Morvik shook him hard. "I've got a plan," he whispered. "I'll go for help whilst you hold the man here with the pistol."

Rynndal chuckled with laughter. "You're an idiot, Olav. If you had come up with this bluff a month or two ago I might have taken you seriously. But this is just too banal, my dear friend. I am really beginning to think seriously that your mental equipment is beginning to fail. Everything points to it."

Morvik was feverish. "The pistol," he whispered. "Where is it? I put it on the table and now it is no longer there."

He went to the corner cupboard and began rummaging about. "It's not here, either," he said. "And the package with cartridges has also gone. The killer has barricaded himself in there with the gun. Don't you see that we have got to get away from here, Karl?"

Rynndal's voice became irritated. "Obviously you have hidden the weapon and the ammunition yourself, Olav. And you're pretending that you have not. Not really a bad piece of bluff for someone like you. I'll surely tell our shop-assistant friend about your fantasies when he wakes up early tomorrow. Until then, goodnight, Olav. I am going to sleep now."

Morvik had given up. He sneaked into his room again and put on all his clothes, put on his anorak, and packed his rucksack. He put on his ski boots in the hall, so as to make as little noise as

*five thousand dollars

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possible. Then he opened the outside door carefully and went out into the icy, stormy darkness. *I've got to make it,* he thought.

He battled his way through the wind and the blizzard. The rucksack, a spade, and all his other equipment made him feel more secure. He could dig a hole in the snow to shelter in if worst came to worst. He knew the mountains, and he was in good physical shape. The weather had got a little better and he could soon glimpse a pale moon above the tattered clouds.

On the last few kilometers it felt as if his legs would give way under him, but when he at last reached the tree limit with the small, characteristic mountain pass, he knew he was going to make it.

It was half-past two in the morning when he tottered into the reception at Åslien Mountain Hotel. Guests in party dress came out from the bar and restaurant to stare at him as if he was the Man on the Moon himself as he staggered towards the reception counter.

At daylight, three snow scooters headed across the snowy, windblown mountain plateaux. In one of them sat Olav Morvik, well wrapped up in thick clothes. In the others were the local police chief and his men. They were armed, and they were in a hurry. The police chief, a grey-bearded man in his mid fifties, had a hard, clenched expression on his wrinkled face, and his glance swept searchingly across the barren landscape.

They found the snow scooter snowed-under, half a kilometer from the cabin. The police chief checked it over and nodded to the others.

"This is the one he stole, that scoundrel."

They approached the cabin, at a good distance from each other. "Now we'll have to move carefully forward, guys." The plan was to surround it, and for Morvik to make another try to get Rynndal out.

"Let's hope the scoundrel is a heavy sleeper," said the police chief.

At that moment a shot rang out from the cabin, and they stiffened. A moment later a tall, fair man emerged from the cabin door. He was red in the face and looked desperate.

"Drop your weapon!" shouted the police chief.

The fair-haired man stood stock-still. When he saw all the armed police he dropped the pistol and put his hands in the air.

Morvik went slowly towards the cabin door. He opened it. On the floor by the sofa lay Karl Rynndal. In the middle of his chest, the thick Icelandic sweater was red with blood.

"Too late," whispered Morvik.

The killer had a hysterical note in his voice when he screamed, "I had to do it. This guy was babbling on the whole time that it was all a joke that his mate had planned with me. And then he wanted to take the pistol from me. I couldn't let him fool me that way, for God's sake!"

Morvik couldn't take his eyes off the dead man.

"Karl, you idiot," he whispered. "You poor, damned naive idiot." ●

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Art by Luis Perez

THE CONCEPT

by Kevin Wignall

Robinson had stretched the octopus to more than double its original size by the time the knock came on the door. It was a couple of feet across now but looked perilously taut, its flesh so close to being torn in all directions that it was painful to look at.

It was compulsive viewing, though, sickeningly so, and better than he'd dared hope for. He could already see it: A half-dozen much larger specimens filling the gallery space, or even a whole sea of them someplace like the Turbine Hall. His critics would have to yield, then, and accept that he'd never lost his unique vision.

He thought about cranking up the tension a little further, but stood back first to admire his work, just in case the extra notch was the one that ended this first experiment. That was when the knock came.

He opened the door to Ivan, his neighbor from across the landing in the other top-floor loft. Theirs was not a sitcom arrangement—during the six months they'd been neighbors, they'd had no more than a dozen exchanges, most of them amounting to just a few words, all of them cryptic.

It wasn't just the language barrier. Ivan was a suit, his rudimentary grasp of English merely serving as a cover for his complete lack

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of cultural depth. He didn't have the word "conceptual" or even the words required to explain conceptual, so Robinson had described himself simply as an artist and Ivan had asked him a number of times, "Please, your paintings?"

"Hello, Ivan."

Ivan winced. It was a simple enough name, but something about Robinson's pronunciation of it grated on his neighbor.

Ivan pushed a heavy bag inside the door and said, "Hello. Please, you keep for me. It's private, you, me."

"Our secret."

"Yes!" He looked astonished, as if he'd never suspected there might be a word to cover it. Then Robinson noticed he was agitated, in a hurry. "Thank you, Robinson, my friend. Goodbye."

"Er, goodbye, Ivan." Wince. "Is everything okay?"

"All is fine. Please, you keep." Agitated or not, he glanced over Robinson's shoulder with a double take and said, "Is squid?"

"Octopus. Like squid."

Ivan nodded, cocked his head as if listening for something, and walked back to his own door. As he closed it, he waved at Robinson. Robinson closed his door, too, looked approvingly at the superbly expanded octopus, then at the large bag. Ivan had pushed it along the floor and it had seemed heavy.

He started to unzip it, but was immediately disturbed by a commotion, the sound of many heavy-footed people running up the stairs. He recoiled guiltily from the bag and stood by the door, nerves asunder, and felt ridiculous for acting like a frightened child—Robinson Anders, cowering!

Even so, he was terrified as the footsteps reached the top, the dosage increased further by the explosion he later learned was Ivan's door being knocked in. And fear had so transported him by the time of the gunshots that he couldn't decipher the sounds—they were just indistinct bangs, somewhere outside.

He heard voices beyond the door and arrived fuzzily at the conclusion that Ivan's visitors were policemen. He was relieved that he and Ivan had talked so little, that he knew nothing about his business, not even his nationality. Ivan was probably dead, that fact was registering, and it was best for Robinson that they weren't connected in any way. Except for the bag.

He took a drink, looked out briefly at the police cars parked awk-

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wardly in the street below, and returned to his octopus. Emboldened, he stretched it an extra notch, one tentacle at a time. The elasticity was amazing. He was inspecting the flesh for any telltale signs of tearing when there was another knock on the door.

It was a policeman. He was about Robinson's age but looked a lot older somehow—his hairstyle, the beginnings of jowls, a suit that no thirty-four-year-old man should have been comfortable wearing. Robinson had to admit that about Ivan; he'd been a suit, but a funky cutting-edge suit, with a tie collection to match.

The policeman introduced himself—Robinson didn't catch his name or rank because he wasn't really listening. He apologized for the disturbance, hinted vaguely at what they'd been doing there, asked Robinson how well he'd known Ivan, and then said, "Is that an octopus?"

Robinson turned to look at it. Amazing.

"Yes, it is," he said triumphantly. "I'm an artist."

The policeman looked momentarily bemused before realizing that this wasn't just an artist, but a famous artist. Apparently in awe of his celebrity status rather than his creative powers, he said, "You're Robinson Anders."

He was.

"I saw your thing, the dog in boxes, I saw it at Tate Modern."

"'My Best Friend Just Fell Apart.'"

"Sorry?" He seemed confused, maybe even suspicious, as he said, "You just told me you barely knew him."

"What?"

"Your neighbor."

"No, 'My Best Friend Just Fell Apart,' that's the title of . . . the dog in boxes."

"Oh, I didn't realize. Everyone calls it the dog in boxes."

"I know."

"My Best Friend Just Fell Apart," the breakthrough work which established both Robinson Anders and The Empty Space Gallery in the public consciousness. The work consisted of sixteen Perspex cubes, each containing one section of a dead dog. They were scattered on the floor and visitors were encouraged to put them together any way they liked—most of the newspapers carried pictures of children assembling them like building blocks. The interactive element of the exhibit was withdrawn after a figurative painter attacked one of the blocks with a hammer. The end of the dog's tail was damaged and had to be repaired, resulting in tightened security and even more publicity. The attacker was given a suspended sentence and gained some publicity of his own, though his paintings exposed some fundamental limitations in his technique, particularly in the execution of hands and feet, surprising given the strength of his views on what constituted real art.

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Robinson finished cleaning up the last of the octopus. It had exploded with some violence and he still wasn't certain he'd managed to find all the pieces. The cleaner would probably find a chunk and assume it was the remains of a meal, some new, overblown variant of sushi, which, in a way, he supposed it was. Maybe that's what he'd call it. "I Don't Eat Sushi." "Sushi Is Not for Eating." "When Sushi Came Home." "If You Knew Sushi Like I Know Sushi." He'd think about it.

He poured himself some wine and collapsed onto the sofa. He felt pretty good, like he was back in the driving seat, all creative systems go, many other clichés. It was too bad about Ivan, but then he *had* been involved in organized crime or something like that—that's what the policeman had told him—so he supposed it was only fair.

He looked at the bag and thought about taking a look inside it now. He was willing himself off the sofa when the phone rang.

"Robinson, are you okay?" Max Makin, owner of The Empty Space.

"Of course I'm okay."

"Your building's on the news right now. Switch it on, the police killed some Kazakh gangster."

"Ivan was a Kazakh?" That was the last thing he would have taken him for, not that he was a hundred percent certain what a Kazakh looked like, or even where Kazakhstan was.

"Turn it on. It's on now!"

"Max, you know I don't watch television."

"Nor do I! I just had it on in the background!" Rumbled, and he knew it. "How's it going with the octopus?"

"Okay. I think it has real potential."

"Great! Anyway, gotta go. As long as you're okay, that's the important thing." Robinson couldn't help but wonder if Max was disappointed, if he'd relished the prospect of a posthumous price-hike slightly more than that of selling a cephalopod-based exhibit by an artist many believed was no longer of the moment.

He walked over to the bag and knelt down in front of it. The first thing he saw as he unzipped the top was some sheets of A4 stapled together. The first sheet had the names and addresses of four men, the top one of which had been crossed out. The remaining sheets appeared to show the floor plans for the four addresses, each covered in explanatory notes. The notes were in Russian—if Kazakhstan was in Russia, that would make sense because Ivan had looked vaguely Russian.

Apart from that, the bag contained a variety of objects wrapped individually in dark cloth. He took the one off the top, unwrapped it, and placed it on the floor, then the next, and so on until he'd emptied the bag. The final display looked like an exhibit in itself, or like those news pictures the police released after an amnesty, a menagerie of guns spread across a trestle table.

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There were no Second World War relics here, though. What Ivan had asked him to look after was a state-of-the-art armory, and enough ammunition to have taken on all of the policemen who'd come a-wooing earlier in the day. He guessed Ivan had known they were on the way but hadn't reckoned on them coming in firing—he'd thought only of hiding the evidence of who he was.

The collection included a couple of silencers and Robinson experimented, seeing which of the guns he could attach them to. The aesthetic of one revolver-silencer combo particularly appealed to him and he stood for a while practising his moves in the mirror, Travis Bickle-style. It was a shame he didn't have a shoulder holster or anything, and that he couldn't do impressions. He tried saying, "You talking to me?" a couple of times, but it sounded ridiculous.

He liked the way he looked with a gun, though. He liked the potency of it. And now he wanted to fire it. He studied it, working out how the ammunition clip worked, the safety catch, then placed it carefully on the table and started to construct a target.

He fixed some sofa cushions up against the wall, took a sheet of paper, and drew a rough human form on it. He was about to pin it to the cushions, but couldn't resist adding some more details—spiky hair, a few high-punk fashion accessories, androgynous cyborg clothing—figuring his first practice might go better if the target resembled his ex-wife.

He stood twenty feet away, aimed, fired. The gun's kick was harder than he expected and the noise was loud enough to make him catch his breath. In films, silencers produced a polite little *phut,* but the shot he'd just fired had seemed to wrench the air apart. If Ivan had still been next-door he'd almost certainly have heard and recognized it, the sound of a hit, or an attempted hit.

The bullet had glanced over the top of Ingrid's right shoulder but it *had* hit the wider target. Robinson felt pleased with himself. He took aim again, adjusting his position, concentrating. The second bullet got her in the middle of the chest, the third took out the side of her face—not perfect, but he had a flair for this, he could tell.

Once he'd emptied the gun into the target, he studied the rest of the armory and thought about trying something else. There was a machine gun of sorts that he really wanted to take for a spin, but maybe that was one for a weekend in Devon. There was a sniper rifle, too, but it was in pieces and his adrenaline was running too high for a self-assembly session.

The buzzer sounded, a short yell that was easy enough to ignore, followed by two much more persistent drones. He answered.

"Robinson, it's Ingrid, let me in."

He looked at the floor, at the target—even shot-up, it was still recognizably her—and said quickly, "I'm working on something, I'll meet you in the Charlotte Street in five minutes."

"So throw a sheet over it." In a quieter voice she added, "I'm con-

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cerned about you, Robinson, but I'm not compromising my art-cred by being seen having a drink with you."

"That's why I divorced you."

She made to reply but he cut her off with the buzzer, and as she leapt for the street door, he grabbed a sheet and threw it over the guns on the floor. He tore down the target. The cushions were quite neatly holed; even so, he covered the sofa with a throw. Ingrid knocked on the door. He took one more look around the room, spotted the gun he'd been firing, and popped it into the drawer. With a deep breath he opened the door, knowing what the first words from her mouth would be.

"You didn't divorce me. I divorced . . ." She screwed up her face. "What's that smell?"

He looked nonplussed for a second before offering, "Sushi? I had sushi."

"Did you, now?" He noticed her stealing a furtive look at the sheet on the floor as she strolled in and collapsed onto the sofa. She'd never lived here with him and yet her body language still seemed to express ownership. She was in his life for keeps, like a piece of shrapnel, just visible beneath the skin, the source of occasional gnawing pains. "Who is she?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The girl. Robinson, you only ever eat sushi when you're trying to impress women. You and I both know you're a pie and mash man."

"Yeah, speaking of pie and mash, what brings you from the East End?"

She smiled, accepting maybe that his choice of sushi-eating consort was none of her business.

"Let's not. Give me a drink, would you?" He poured her a glass of wine. "I was concerned. It was on the news about your neighbor."

She was always being propositioned by lesbians. Looking at her now, dressed like one of the less-defined characters in *The Matrix,* he couldn't even see what had attracted him to her. The answer, of course, was in their hands; another couple of bottles of wine and they'd be all over each other. If only he'd been sober at the wedding.

"I was out when it happened. In fact, the first I heard about it was when Max called to see if I was okay."

"Oh." She was disappointed, but got over it, nodding towards the sheet on the floor. "What are you working on?"

"Why, you wanna go back and have a good laugh with the rest of the sheep?"

"Robinson, you were a pioneer, everyone respects that. It's not our fault you let hype get in the way of true expression."

"Enough!" He'd heard it all too often. Anyway, he'd give her some inside information that she could take back to the East End and have a hoot about. And when the octopus exhibit was launched on the world, she'd realize she'd been duped and made a fool of. "I'll

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show you, but don't touch anything, and you get no explanations."

She got up eagerly and he lifted the sheet to reveal the array of guns. She stared at them in awe, bursting with curiosity.

"Are they real?"

"No explanations."

She nodded and seemed to be genuinely intrigued and impressed.

"This looks *very* interesting." She laughed to herself. "I knew it couldn't be true."

"What?"

"Oh, it's ridiculous. I heard you were doing something with a squid!" She laughed louder and Robinson joined in, nervous and wounded. Max was the only person who knew, which meant he too had been making fun of him, distancing himself to keep his own cutting-edge credentials. He could imagine everyone having a good belly-laugh about it, but that just made him more determined; there'd be a whole sea of them in the Turbine Hall and he'd call it "Washed Up on the Shores of the Eternal" and they'd come groveling back to him like the artistic midgets they were.

"I'm sorry."

He looked at her, surprised.

"Maybe I should've stayed loyal. You lost your way, but I shouldn't have deserted you the way I did."

"I didn't lose my way."

She ignored him and said, "I really like the look of this. It's like you've taken a step back to 'All Will Be Lost, All Will Be Saved,' but then set off on the right road, instead of the cul-de-sac you actually took."

"I didn't take a cul-de-sac, and I seem to remember that us breaking up was about a lot more than my supposed artistic decline."

She gave him a look, an infuriating "You know that's not true" look, but said charitably, "Even so, I'd like us to be friends again."

He promised himself he'd never drink enough again to end up with such a shallow parasite of a woman. He almost wished he hadn't tidied the place, so that she could have seen what he'd been doing a few minutes before her arrival. But if she thought he might be on the up again, she was hardly likely to be put off by the fact of his firing live ammunition at her effigy.

"You have to leave now. I have work to do."

"All Will Be Lost, All Will Be Saved," the second major work in the Robinson Anders story, winner of the Turner Prize, so vivid in the public consciousness that a question was asked in Parliament about the ethics of the piece. Ingrid rather pretentiously suggested calling it "The Collision of Serendipity and Genius," a title he rejected out of hand, not least because serendipity played only a tangential role in its creation. During a week in Devon, he stum-

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bled upon the auction of a collection of Victorian medical instruments. He bought it whole and, sensing its potential, searched for more material. A few months later he snapped up a collection of medical specimens, also from the nineteenth century—various pickled organs, body parts, and freakish curiosities. He then placed bogus ads in a number of publications, offering large sums of money for body parts. The final exhibit comprised the two collections interspersed with the replies from the ads, which he had scrimshawed onto a job lot of human skulls. One of the magazines in which he advertised and one of the respondents launched lawsuits against him, both dismissed; a Member of Parliament asked whether it was ethical to dupe desperate and vulnerable people in such a heartless way for something of so little artistic merit; a newspaper editorial suggested that the police should look into the provenance of the skulls; the art world venerated him like a god.

He was in a cul-de-sac. He reversed and took the next left, slowing down this time to check the street name. This was probably a pointless trip anyway, but he'd give it a shot; if nothing came of it, he'd just go back to the octopus. Ingrid had planted a seed, though, and the more he'd thought of it, the more he'd sensed there was real artistic potential in this.

He was on his way to see Jonathan Myers, the second person on Ivan's list. He'd tell him what he'd found, ask for his thoughts, see if he could work it into an exhibit with the guns. It was an outside chance, but at the very least, he suspected the other people on the list might want to know they were in danger. He was doing a public good, almost altruism.

This was a respectable area, large and expensive-looking houses, not quite city, not quite suburbia. He was certain Jonathan Myers would be grateful to learn that Ivan Schmidt had planned to come into this leafy neighborhood and murder him. Ivan Schmidt—the newspapers had revealed that Ivan was an ethnic German from Kazakhstan, the description of his heritage a lot more comprehensive than the details of exactly what he was supposed to have done.

Robinson pulled up outside the house, checked that his tape recorder was working, and got out. The only light came from the glass above the front door, but there was a Jaguar parked in the drive so he guessed someone was in. It was only after he'd rung the bell that he became nervous about the kind of person he was likely to encounter.

Jonathan Myers sounded like a reasonable enough person, but names could be deceptive, and what if that was only his birth name? For all Robinson knew, the wider world could know this man as "Mad Jonny Myers"—the guy could be a twenty-stone bruiser with a shaved head and a record of unprovoked violence.

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One thing he knew, when artists consorted with the underclass it inevitably ended in syphilis and tears.

The door opened and his fears gushed out of him at the sight of the slim young professional standing there. Myers wore glasses, had his hair neatly combed, cufflinks in his shirt, his tie still firmly secured under his collar. Robinson could tell that the news he had to break would come as something of a shock.

"Mr. Myers?"

"Yes?" He looked wary, expecting a sales pitch.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but have you ever heard of Ivan Schmidt?" Bafflement. "This may sound really strange, but he was a hit man. He had a list of four people to kill, but the police killed him before he got to number two." Robinson paused, enjoying his role; it was like being a detective on television. "You were the second person on the list."

He laughed and said, "You must be getting me mixed up with another Jonathan Myers!"

"He had this address and a map of the house."

Suddenly serious, Myers said, "I see. Are you with the police?"

"No, I'm an artist." This didn't seem to put him at ease. "I happened to get hold of the list, and I wondered if you wouldn't mind me interviewing you, about how it feels, that kind of thing. All anonymous, of course."

"Er, I see. You did show the list to the police?"

"No!" He suddenly realized that maybe this was the wrong answer. "Obviously, I will, but I wanted to speak to you first."

"Of course." Myers smiled and stepped back. "Sorry, please do come in."

Robinson's heart sank slightly as he took in the Warhol prints that lined the hall. Lichtenstein he could have lived with, but Warhol! The self-portrait was the least offensive, so he fixed on that, trying to think of something complimentary to say as Myers closed the door.

Then there was a bang and the world cracked open, and suddenly his head hurt. The sound of broken glass registered. He'd felt no push on his back, nothing to explain why he'd flown at force into Andy Warhol's haunted face. He was still being pushed into the wall with fierce power, his arm being twisted up behind his back, and he couldn't breathe. He was suffocating.

There had only been two of them in the hall, but it still came as a shock when he heard Myers shouting urgently into his ear.

"Who sent you? I'll kill you right now! Who sent you?" The threats were quite unnecessary; he *was* killing him, whether he knew it or not. Robinson tried to talk but couldn't—he was suffocating, one eye was full of blood, the other full of Andy Warhol. He'd never experienced so much neatly distilled pain and discomfort.

Finally, Myers eased his grip enough for Robinson to draw in a painful rasping breath. "I'm an artist," he said, furious with him-

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self as he got ground back into the wall.

"Then I should buy your work, because if you don't tell me who sent you, you're gonna be a dead artist."

"No . . . body . . . sent . . . me." The pressure increased. It felt as if Myers was trying to crush his skull against the wall or push him through it. And he didn't have any fight in him, he just wanted the pain to stop, for it to be over. If Myers hadn't started singing, he'd have willingly died there.

Slightly out of breath, though, Myers started to sing "Angels" by Robbie Williams as he gradually exerted more and more pressure on Robinson's head and body. It wasn't even the appalling lack of taste that got to him—the Warhols had removed any element of surprise in that department. At a much more fundamental level, the singing simply reminded him of the tape recorder which, miraculously, was still gripped in his right hand.

He'd thought a couple of times about replacing his tape recorder with a modern reporter's voice recorder. All the reporters he met carried dinky little things that sat neatly on the table in restaurants and cafes. His looked like the kind of equipment anthropologists had taken into the Borneo jungles. Thank God!

"And through it all . . ." warbled the karaokely-deranged Myers. Robinson swung his free arm with as much power as he had left and cracked the recorder down on the side of the singer's head.

For a moment, nothing happened. He'd seen this in films, where the innocent delivered what, in earlier films, would have been a fatal blow with a heavy object, only for the psychopath to say, "That hurt," before continuing in a more determined fashion.

Myers stopped singing, but gripped him harder and pulled him backwards. At first, Robinson thought he was pulling him back just enough to drive him further into the wall. He continued to move backwards, though, and then they were falling, death-grip still in place.

He heard Myers's head crack onto the floor at the same instant as his own involuntary body-slam knocked the air out of his lungs. The impact hurt even with Myers as a cushion, so it must have hurt Myers a lot more, but Robinson still scrambled up and made to swing once more at his assailant's head with the tape recorder.

Two things stopped him. Only the handle of the recorder remained in his hand—the main chunk of it lay on the floor nearby, a couple of smaller pieces further afield. And Myers appeared to be dead, a small pool of blood creeping out from the back of his head.

Seeing his benign face again, Robinson still found it hard to believe this was the person who'd attacked him. And that made it worse. He'd have enough trouble explaining this to the police as it was without the added difficulty of his victim looking so harmlessly respectable. The police hadn't believed Roman Polanski,

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they hadn't believed Phil Spector, so why would they believe him?

There was no other option but to cover his tracks and get out of there. He took a plastic bag from the kitchen and imagined himself like an anti-Gil Grissom, collecting absolutely everything that might connect him to the crime scene. He even removed Myers's outer layer of clothing, leaving him in a jockstrap—and if he'd known he was the kind of person who wore a jockstrap under a suit he'd have no doubt been less trusting in the first place.

The following twenty-four hours required him to stay calm and collected in front of precisely no one. Max didn't even call. There was nothing in the paper. The next morning, though, his paper contained the story. Jonathan Myers, a financial analyst, had been found bludgeoned to death. As a valuable print had been stolen, and as Myers had been found in his underwear, there was some speculation that he'd disturbed a burglar.

Only the very end of the story contained a hint of truth. A police spokesperson had refused to speculate on whether this crime was linked in any way to the death of Ivan Schmidt, the Kazakh hit man killed by police the week before. That meant the reporters had their own intelligence, and that the police would be secretly following the same leads.

This was very good news. They'd never suspect he had anything to do with it, and that was a relief. But more importantly, he could see that there really was artistic potential in this. It was forming in his mind now, and it was beautiful. He picked up his keys and headed down the street, intent on buying all the newspapers he could find, relishing the prospect of his imminent return from the cold.

"Schrödinger's Dog." When the authorized biography of his life came to be written, this particular chapter would be called "The Wilderness Years." The unauthorized biography would probably call it "The Bubble Bursts," but Robinson would sue them and have an embargo placed on the book, so he didn't need to worry about that. "Schrödinger's Dog" was in many respects a return to his first major work. In retrospect, he might have seen how people of limited imagination would mistake it for a retread, failing to see the layered ironies and satirical analysis that was inherent in the work. It once again consisted of sixteen boxes, but they were made from lead and welded shut. Only the name hinted at what might or might not be contained inside. It was too soon, though, for a bridge between the two cultures. The art world savaged him for repeating himself, for being gimmicky, and, worst of all, for possessing all the shock value of a puerile adolescent. The science community was canvassed with relish by the broadsheets and concluded that his work was at best irrelevant and at worst a gross distortion of quantum mechanics. Ingrid left him, but not before helpfully suggesting that he have the words "has" and "been" tattooed on his buttocks.

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The phone stopped ringing. No one was outraged.

Camilla let Max into the studio on the ground floor of the building in which Robinson lived. Max was surprised to see her, and she was still clearly surprised to be there—Robinson had been paying her not to come to work for the last eighteen months and the sudden reminder that she was his assistant had apparently come as something of a shock.

"Camilla, would you mind going out and getting us some coffees?"

She gave a dazed nod in response and left them alone.

"So, what have you brought me to see?"

The studio was brightly lit, and the seven-foot glass cube lined with newspaper was hard to miss. Even so, Robinson paused, relishing the look of unease on Max's face. Finally, he gestured casually and said, "What do you think?"

"Oh. This is it? Great . . . er, it's . . ."

Robinson laughed and said, "You have to look inside."

Max walked over and put his face against the glass. The newspapers, all containing the Myers story, were stuck to the inside of the glass, but he'd left small viewing slits. He was excited now, because he knew that Max was taking in the eerie sepia-lit interior, the realistic mannequin dressed in Myers's clothes (laundered and then doused in pig's blood), the broken tape recorder, the Warhol print (repainted as a Lichtenstein). The scene was realistic and squalid and powerful. And of course, like all the greatest art, it was possessed of the truth.

"Now, I can really sell this. I'm talking a lot of money. And it's brilliant, of course." He pulled himself away from the glass. "What's it called?"

"'Death by Multimedia.'"

"Fantastic. Are you planning any more like this?"

He thought of the list upstairs. How could he plan for more like this? But he knew from Max's reaction that this was it, his return to glory, and he didn't want Max claiming any of it for himself.

"It's the first part of a triptych. The whole project's called 'Reveal Yourself.'"

"'Reveal Yourself, Part One: Death by Multimedia.' You're a genius! How could I ever have doubted you?"

"You didn't."

"That's what I mean."

The next couple of weeks fell on the good side of déjà vu: interviews and invitations declined; congratulatory messages on his answering machine, none of them returned; copy in all the newspapers; questions about whether artists should be allowed to exploit unsolved murders for their own shallow ends.

There was so much renewed interest in Robinson Anders that he wondered if it would prove difficult to go unnoticed to Pimlico

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and dispatch Michael Sibley. Of course, he didn't really have to kill him, there was no obligation, but Max had really talked up the triptych to the media and Robinson knew now how much he'd missed the adulation. He could always fake it, true, but he'd know he was faking it, and other people might spot the difference, too.

In the great scheme of things, art was more important than the life of any given individual. It was already more important than Jonathan Myers, and so it would be for the others. Besides, if they were anything like Myers, it was hardly a great loss to society. On the contrary, it was a philanthropic act.

Like Myers, Sibley appeared to be a young and respectable businessman. He was dressed casually, but in the unconvincing style of someone used to wearing a suit. He smiled as he opened the door and asked if he knew Robinson from somewhere, his voice veering towards camp. It was hard to imagine this man producing the same kind of violent shock as Myers, but Robinson took no chances.

He stepped quickly into the hall, closing the door with his elbow, drawing the gun from the plastic bag he was carrying. Sibley backed off fearfully and, on the appearance of the gun, ran screaming into the kitchen. Robinson ran after him to prevent him arming himself, but Sibley had already run further, into a conservatory attached to the back of the house.

Robinson stepped through the door, hit by the warmth and the scent of growth from the orchids that filled every available space. He could hear his victim sniveling, and as he moved closer, Sibley started pleading quietly, "Please don't. Take anything, but please don't hurt me. I haven't done anything."

Robinson rounded a corner between two banks of orchids and found him cowering on the floor.

"I'm sorry," said Robinson, raising the gun.

"No!" He was high-pitched, squealing. "I'll do anything. Tell me what you want."

"You don't understand. It's nothing personal, it's art." He pulled the trigger, the familiar wrench of air followed by a sound that was queasily visceral. He'd been aiming for Sibley's chest but had somehow managed to hit him in the head. Sibley died instantly, but his blood went everywhere, falling only a few inches short of where Robinson stood.

He imagined Gil Grissom walking into this crime scene and immediately realized he could smell paraffin. He looked around under the staging, found the spare can, and poured as much of it as he could over Sibley's body, all the while being careful not to leave footprints in the blood.

He walked back to the kitchen door then and took aim at the paraffin heater itself. The explosion and ensuing inferno were both slightly more impressive than he'd anticipated and he felt guilty suddenly about all those amazing orchids that were about to

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shrivel and fry. It was already furnace-hot but he stepped nimbly back into the conservatory, grabbed the nearest pot, and slipped it into the bag with the gun.

When he got home, there was a message from Max telling him to call immediately. He watered the orchid, poured himself some wine, watched an episode of "The World's Wildest Police Videos." Max called him again half an hour later.

"Robinson, there's an art magazine launch in two weeks and they want you to be guest of honor. I think you should go."

"What magazine?"

"It's called *Pun in the Oven*—very hip, very cutting-edge, and they're giving the lead profile in the launch issue over to you."

"Are they putting me on the cover?"

"They've got something by Spencer Tunick on the cover—acres of flesh, understandable—but it's good coverage for you, very cred."

"I don't need cred, but okay, I'll go."

He put the phone down, then picked it up again and left a message on Camilla's voice mail. He needed a few thousand matches, and he needed them burned.

"Getting Warmer." The simplicity was part of its breathtaking beauty, according to the *Times* at least. "Getting Warmer," the second part of Anders's triptych, was another seven-foot glass cube. This one had thousands of spent matches stuck to the inside of the glass, so that from a distance it appeared black and opaque. On closer inspection, though, a viewer could peer between the matches at the serenely macabre scene. A figure lay fetal-position upon the floor, coiled around an object that stood in the centre of the box. Once again the mannequin seemed remarkably lifelike, even though Robinson had worked it to look like a badly charred corpse. The object about which it was coiled was an orchid. The Prime Minister invited him to drinks at Number 10. He declined.

Robinson was on his way out when he was stopped by someone ascending the stairs. He guessed it was the person who'd taken Ivan's apartment, but after staring hopefully at Robinson for a couple of seconds the man said, "You don't remember me, do you? Detective Inspector Redfern? I spoke to you the day your neighbor was killed."

"Yes, I do, I remember." He didn't. He remembered being visited by somebody, but this person's face wasn't at all familiar. "You're working rather late."

"I am, but could you spare a couple of minutes?" Robinson took him back to the apartment and almost immediately Redfern said, "You gave up on the octopus, then?"

Now he remembered him.

"No, just put it back a bit. When inspiration strikes, you have to

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run with it."

"Of course. I like the new work, anyway. I haven't seen the matches yet, but I really liked the newspapers." Robinson nodded modestly. "Actually, it's your new work that I wanted to speak to you about."

Robinson tried to stay calm, but he could feel himself giving something away so he covered it by going on the attack, saying mockingly, "You're not gonna tell me I'm hindering the case?"

"No, no, not at all." He laughed. "No, and I can understand your fascination with these killings, what with Ivan Schmidt having been your neighbor and everything. The thing is, we're worried that the people behind them might think you know more than you do. It's possible they could even target you." Robinson looked bemused and Redfern laughed again, a little embarrassed. "It's highly unlikely. We just want you to be aware of the possibility. To be vigilant. And not to be afraid of getting in touch if you suspect anything."

"Thanks. I'll see you out." As they walked downstairs, Robinson invited Redfern along to the magazine launch but apparently, even at this late hour, the detective had work to do.

The launch party was bubbling by the time he got there, and full of nakedness. In honor of the Spencer Tunick cover, the magazine had hired a hundred or so ordinary—that is, young and slim—people to mingle naked with the rest of the guests.

It seemed a suitably decadent setting for his comeback and he reveled in the electric thrill that crackled through the crowd as people realized he was there. This was better than it had ever been. Most people were even too afraid to talk to him, merely smiling and nodding reverentially as he strolled idly about. Max spoke, of course, as did a number of people who claimed brazenly to have never lost faith in him.

After thirty minutes he was thinking of leaving when a naked girl walked over to him and said, "Hi, I'm Emma." She was stunning—short mousy hair which unfortunately reminded him of Ingrid, but otherwise, stunning.

"I'm Robinson. So you're part of this evening's artwork."

"No, I just couldn't find anything to wear." Funny into the bargain.

He said, "You have a great body. Excellent breasts." She laughed. "Don't tell me—sexist, very un-PC?"

"Not at all. You're the first person this evening to openly notice that I'm naked. I've never had so many men keeping eye contact with me at all cost."

"Well, I'm an artist; I'd be breaching union rules if I didn't stare at your breasts."

She smiled and said, "You probably get this all the time, but I really liked 'Schrödinger's Dog.' I simply don't understand why people didn't get it. I like the new stuff, too, very *CSI*. You must feel like the Gil Grissom of the art world."

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"Who? I don't watch television."

"Yes, you do." Her tone conveyed a chummy admonition. "Channel Five. You probably never miss *CSI,* or *Law and Order,* you probably love those car-chase programs—I know *I* do."

"What did you say your name was?"

"Emma."

"Are you an artist, Emma?"

"No, I'm a post-grad, just finishing my doctoral thesis in Psychology."

"Would you like to go for a drink when you get your clothes back?"

"I'd love to."

"Hello, Robinson." The pain of the old war wound, Ingrid. He turned to see her standing there, a naked young man in tow. Both Robinson and Emma immediately looked at his genitals. "This is Kurt."

"Hi, Kurt. Have you got a license for those?" He heard Emma trying not to choke on a mouthful of wine. Ingrid didn't laugh. Kurt smiled gormlessly, his mouth slobbery and disturbing. "Er, this is Emma. Emma, this is Ingrid, my ex-wife."

They all smiled, said hello, and then fell into an awkward silence until Emma turned to Kurt and said, "Isn't it embarrassing when you find someone else wearing the same outfit?" Kurt laughed vigorously and Ingrid seemed uncomfortable, recovering herself only by looking at his lean and muscular body, lingering over its most dominant feature.

She looked up and smiled at Robinson, a flaunting smile that suggested she was bitter somehow, and said, "I like the new work. When are you gonna use the guns?"

He stalled for a second, wondering if she suspected anything, and if she might make trouble for him, but he gave her a smug look and said, "What makes you think I haven't used them already?" She didn't have the first idea what he was talking about, a reassuring sign, but she smiled knowingly in an attempt to preserve the illusion of intellectual and artistic equality.

For the first time, though, he realized he'd been a little cocksure about the circumstantial evidence. It only took Ingrid to blab to other people about the collection of guns and then for some journalist to start piecing things together. He'd probably have to use some of the arsenal in the final part of the triptych, but even then, he didn't want questions being raised about where he'd managed to get hold of that kind of hardware.

These thoughts continued to preoccupy him, but not enough to prevent him having a good time with the fabulous Emma Peel—not only did she look great naked, she dressed like an indie rock god and had a legendary television name. She could put away the sauce, too.

He was like a love-struck schoolboy the next day when he drove out to Surrey to check out the home of Daniel Oblomov. The plans

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for this house included a detailed map of the grounds and as soon as he got there, he knew why. Oblomov lived on a substantial and very well-guarded estate. Clearly, this was what the sniper rifle was for.

That weekend he took Emma to the house in Devon. Between sublime hours of sex and conversation he sloped off into the woods and practiced his skills with the rifle. Unfortunately, it didn't come naturally to him, his first efforts so poor that he suspected he'd assembled the gun incorrectly. He even feared that the first flush of love might have robbed him of his killer instinct. Whatever it was, he knew he'd have to deviate from Ivan's plan and find another way of immortalizing Oblomov.

Two days later, that plan was still very much in the conceptual stages when the buzzer went and serendipity collided head-on with genius. The man on the other end wanted to talk about his art so he let him up, a tall, fair-haired guy in his forties, wearing a very expensive suit and Berluti shoes.

As soon as Robinson closed the door, he looked around and said, "I'm sorry to bother you at home. I'm interested in your new work."

"Not a problem, though you really should speak to Max Makin, Mr. . . . ?"

"Oblomov. Daniel Oblomov." He studied Robinson closely. "I see you recognize the name, and that's why I needed to speak to you. I've slipped away from my bodyguards because I know they'd think I'm crazy, but I do believe you can help me."

He was in shock, but Robinson gestured towards the sofa and said, "I'll do what I can." Though he could hardly kill him here.

"I know I'm next. If they've killed Broadhurst, Myers, and Sibley, they'll want to kill me, too."

"Who?"

"I was rather hoping you'd help me with that. I know you're only an artist, but you knew Schmidt, and you've clearly studied these hits. Anything you might be able to tell me would be most appreciated, and will be amply rewarded."

"There might be something," said Robinson, and walked over to the drawer. He took the gun out. "*Only* an artist! You philistine! How dare you, how dare you come into my house and say things like that!" Oblomov didn't have time to react. Robinson lifted the gun and emptied it into the cultural vacuum of Oblomov's body and head.

Some people, he thought, really didn't deserve to live. He walked over and took in the considerable mess he'd have to clean up, wondering how real hit men dealt with such an excess of blood. Maybe real hit men simply didn't clean up after themselves, or maybe they had cleaners who understood.

"I did this." The three words were scrawled countless times on the inside of the glass cube. If tested, the paint would be seen to contain human blood, that of the artist himself. Inside was a concrete

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block, inspired in part by Rachel Whiteread and in part by old-fashioned gangster tales. Concrete fossils of various objects emerged from the surface of the block. On closer inspection, it was clear that most of these were molds of guns, though on the top could just be seen the soles of two shoes, a clear reference to the disappearance of Daniel Oblomov, a story which had been running in the papers for weeks. Oblomov himself was not in the block. Taking advantage of the fact that he belonged to a profession which regularly used both industrial levels of acid and animal-waste services, Robinson had disposed of the body in a more orthodox fashion. It didn't matter, the essence of his death was still there, and he'd died for art; what better epitaph could a man want?

Robinson and Emma were in a taxi on the way home from the party at The Empty Space Gallery, the first viewing of the complete "Reveal Yourself" triptych. He'd almost become blasé about his renewed superstar status, but he was a little drunk and very content, and an equally drunk and content Emma was sitting next to him idly stroking his thigh.

"Any idea what you'll do in the Turbine Hall?"

Earlier in the day, Tate Modern had offered him the Turbine Hall for his next project.

"Not sure yet." It wouldn't be an octopus. Beyond that, though, he didn't have a clue what to do next. "I suppose I'll just wait for inspiration to strike. Maybe I'll do a psychology-based exhibit. If only I knew a psychologist I could study." She laughed conspiratorially.

When they got to his apartment, Emma headed for the bathroom and Robinson hovered, not sure what to do in her absence. He struggled through the fug of drunkenness to think what he'd have done before Emma came on the scene. Then he noticed the briefcase on the table and walked over.

It belonged to neither of them, and no one else but the cleaner had access to the apartment. In his confused state he concluded that the cleaner had come over to do a bit of late-night dusting and had left her briefcase there. He opened it, looked inside, studied the contents, and realized it was for him. He heard Emma coming back and closed it again and slid it carefully under the table.

She flopped onto the sofa and reached for the remote control. He joined her, sleepily watching some *FBI Case Study* on Channel 5. His mind was full of questions, though. Who was it from, and how did they know it was him? And all that money in crisp bundles of notes, was it for the three people he'd killed, or for the four new names on the list in the briefcase? And stylistically, was he now an artistic hit man, or a hit-man artist? And why hadn't they given him a contact number, because if he was going to fill the Turbine Hall, he'd need a lot more than four. ●

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FLASHBACK

by Sue Pike

I don't know what it is about summer cottages. People drive half a day to get to them and then leave their common sense at the screen door. Folk who don't know any better think cottaging will be nothing but sun and sand and puttering around in an old rowboat. They think the beauty and isolation will give them some kind of immunity from danger. But I'm a small-town doctor and I've seen the other side of this life, the dark side, if you will, the secrets, the sadnesses, and the ruined lives.

I've lived in Random Falls all my life, first as a boy growing up here and then as a family physician. I'm eighty now and although I retired from regular practice some years ago, I still keep my medical license up-to-date. Young doctors don't want to settle in these remote places anymore, and while most folk are content to drive thirty or forty miles to the nearest town for a checkup, they want a doctor nearby if there's an emergency. I'm glad to be of some use, because the days drag since my wife died last year. My son is after me to move into a retirement home—says it's time I gave up trying to save other people's lives and started concentrating on my own. After yesterday, I'm beginning to agree with him.

Some cottages in particular seem steeped in tragedy. Sadness and failure clings to these places like mold. Twenty years ago when the accident happened at the Shanks' cottage, I told them they ought to sell up. There are plenty of other lakes, I said. Lakes where bad memories wouldn't lurk in every bay and inlet. But Ralph Shank was a bull-headed man. He told me to keep my nose

Ottawa writer Sue Pike is also an anthologist, having co-edited six books in the "Ladies Killing Circle" series. (See *When Boomers Go Bad*, coming in November, 2005.) She is currently putting together a book of short mystery stories set along the Rideau Canal, a series of lakes and rivers connecting Ottawa and Kingston, Ontario. Its projected title is *Locked Up*, and it should be available in the summer of 2006.

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out, and he and Doreen and young Noel continued spending summers at that benighted place.

It had been a pretty lively cottage before the accident. Not the kind of goings-on my wife and I cared for—too much drinking and partying and loud noise. But at least there was some laughter then. After Heather died, it felt like the place was holding its breath somehow, waiting for the other shoe to drop. And damned if that other boot didn't come crashing down just yesterday.

It all started, as I say, twenty years ago, almost to the day. I still had my clinic in the village at that time and I'd been called to the Shanks' cottage one afternoon in late July because Doreen thought she'd picked up a flu bug. Doreen was a village girl who'd married into the cottage community and her trouble was she drank too much and didn't have enough to occupy her mind, but in those days a doctor couldn't tell a patient that, so I prescribed analgesics and a good long rest.

It was hot as a griddle that day and I left Doreen fanning herself on the sofa while I went outside to lean on the deck rail overlooking the lake. The dock was about fifty feet off and you got to it by way of a rough path that switchbacked down a rocky incline. I could see Ralph turning sharp circles in that old Chris-Craft of his. It was one of those heavy mahogany inboards, originally built in the 'thirties. Ralph had fitted her out with a double tailpipe and a souped-up Jeep engine. He was a foolish man who loved to show off even if there was no one but a twelve-year-old lad around to show off to. And that lad, Ralph's son Noel, was sitting on the dock with a net in his hand, catching sunfish and dropping them into a pail of water.

I watched for a minute and then I turned at the sound of a car engine and saw Ralph's sister-in-law, Marjory, pull up in the driveway and step out of her Buick station wagon. I'd heard she'd be coming by to pick up her ten-year-old daughter, Heather, who'd been visiting her cousin Noel for the past week. Marjory smiled when she saw me, but then she glanced down at the lake and I watched the look on her face change to horror.

I looked over my shoulder to see what had caught her attention and that's when I noticed little Heather in one of those blue and white plastic paddleboats. She was pedaling across from the far shore, heading straight for the dock. I glanced back at the Chris-Craft to see Ralph climb out of the driver's seat and head to the stern. When I looked back at Heather I realized the unmanned boat was tearing right for her and Ralph was facing away, reaching into a cooler for a can of beer.

I shouted, but you couldn't hear anything above the sound of that blasted motor. I ran, of course, but was only halfway down the hill when the speedboat shot right up over that paddleboat and

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the screaming began. I thought at first it must be Marjory making the noise, then I realized Doreen had come outside. She was hanging onto the deck railing, shrieking and wailing. She screamed all through the noise of the collision and through Ralph's blubbering and through the time it took for Marjory and me to scramble into the lake and pull Heather out of the water. Doreen's hysterics and Ralph's whimpered excuses sucked up all the energy, all the air space, until Heather's limp little body became merely a sideshow. Poor Noel just sat frozen on the dock and seemed to vanish inside his own misery.

Marjory never looked at her sister and brother-in-law and never made a sound, just clamped her mouth in a straight line and cradled her daughter to her while we waited for the ambulance. Heather died on the way to hospital, a blessing really, considering the extent of her injuries. Her parents sold off everything and moved to Australia a few months after the inquest. Ralph was found guilty of negligence but the court decided losing his only niece was punishment enough and he got off with a warning.

It must have been a year or two later when I got my first letter from Marjory. They were living in Melbourne and her husband had a job as a civil engineer with a construction company. She told me she'd been three months pregnant when Heather died but had lost the baby soon after the accident. The main reason she was writing, she said, was to ask about Noel. She and Bill had cut off all contact with Doreen and Ralph, so she had no one else she could ask. The boy was on her mind, she said.

Now I've made two serious errors in my life and there's not a day goes by I don't regret both of them. The first was when Marjory was only a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl and she came to my clinic fearing she was pregnant. I confirmed it and then she cried and told me her sister's husband, Ralph, had been bothering her but she didn't want anyone to know about it. It was too late to terminate the pregnancy, so I came up with a solution that seemed to make sense at the time. I told Ralph if he touched her again he'd have me to contend with and then we arranged for Marjory and Doreen to visit their aunt in Manitoba for a few months, and when they came back, Doreen was the proud mother of a bouncing baby boy called Noel. Marjory met Bill a few years later and they got married and had little Heather and I guess I kidded myself that everything was going to be all right.

I made my second terrible mistake when I answered Marjory's letter from Australia. I didn't make a conscious decision to lie. I just couldn't bring myself to tell her Noel was turning out to be the spit of his father in both appearance and behavior, and I made up a story saying how well he was doing at school. The letters continued to come over the years, always wanting an update on Noel.

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To say he was nothing but trouble, that he'd quit school early and spent time in a juvenile detention center, was more than I could bear. He got young Tammy Jenkins pregnant and the two of them were raising the baby in the basement apartment in her parents' farmhouse. I guess I hoped that once they had little Tyler they'd pull themselves together and so it didn't seem such a stretch to write that he was at university and playing on the basketball team. Maybe it satisfied some need of my own to make some good come out of Heather's senseless death.

A couple of years ago Marjory wrote to say Bill had suffered a stroke. She quit her job to stay home and care for him until he died some months later. She wrote that while Bill was ill she began having flashbacks of her daughter's accident. The first time it happened, she was sitting on one of those Melbourne trams you read about. She looked out the window and suddenly saw the whole thing as though she was watching a movie. She saw Heather pedaling that plastic boat across the bay and saw the child being mowed down by that damned Chris-Craft. Marjory started screaming, apparently, and couldn't stop. They put her in hospital for a while and the doctors there told her she was suffering from posttraumatic stress.

She asked me again about Noel, only this time it seemed she might be losing touch with time and reality. She wondered how he was doing at school and whether he had many friends. Now, the truth is, Noel's a grown man of thirty-three with a twelve-year-old son, but I could hardly tell her about the child at this stage, could I? And she apparently didn't know what had happened to Ralph and Doreen. They'd both taken to drinking pretty steadily, and on one of their binges Ralph had driven them both full tilt into a bridge abutment. I couldn't see myself burdening her with that news considering everything else she was going through. If I'd realized I was the only one she was in contact with in this county I might have had more sense. But at the time I just thought I was smoothing things over until she was well again.

Then, the day before yesterday, everything came to a head. I walked down to the post office to pick up my mail and there was a letter from Marjory. I hadn't heard from her for over a year and I'd hoped she'd finally licked her demons and decided to concentrate on her life in Australia. Instead, she wrote that the flashbacks were happening more often and her therapist had recommended she come back to the lake to see if she could deal with the experience once and for all. I read the letter twice, and then checked the date of her arrival with the calendar on the post-office wall. Sure enough, her flight had beat the mail delivery to Random Falls. I got home as fast as my old legs would carry me and hightailed it out to the Shank cottage. I wanted to warn Noel and Tammy about

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the visit, but I'd hardly turned off my ignition before a rental Ford sedan with Marjory at the wheel drove into the yard and parked behind me. I barely recognized her. She'd be nearly fifty now, but the years had been hard on her. She was rake thin and her brown hair was streaked with gray. She didn't even look at me, just stood and stared at the water with flat eyes. I turned and looked at the lake myself, but all I could see was Noel wheeling his father's old Chris Craft around in circles and his twelve-year-old son Tyler scooping sunfish into a pail on the dock. I looked back at her again and I felt as if an army of ants was crawling down my spine. Marjory was seeing something that wasn't there at all.

She let out a scream and started down the hill, her leather shoes slipping on the moss-covered stones. By the time she got to the dock she was howling, "No, Ralph, no!"

Noel couldn't have heard much over the sound of the engine but it was clear he'd seen this wild-looking woman waving her arms around and he slowed the boat to come up to the dock. Young Tyler had jumped into the water by this time, and was hanging onto the edge of the dock staring wide-eyed at the screaming stranger. She turned to the kid and yelled, "Noel!" then grabbed the boat hook from the dock and tried to thrust it toward him, urging him to grab hold. Tyler looked scared to death and started yelling for his dad as he backstroked away from this wild-looking woman.

"Hey!" was all Noel managed to say as the boat bumped up against the dock. Marjory turned on him and swung the hook around with both hands, clipping him across the neck. The blow knocked him out of his seat and onto the gunnels and his weight carried him over and into the water. The boat was still in gear and the propeller must have caught him as he slid under because by the time he surfaced his head was deeply gashed.

Marjory was leaning over trying to coax Tyler onto the dock. "It's all right, Noel. Mommy's here."

Poor little Tyler was trying to hold up his dad's body, but the woman's shrieking must have been making him crazy. I was scrambling as fast as I could, but events were moving even faster. I was still only halfway down to the dock when the kid reached out of the water with his free hand and yanked on Marjory's ankle, perhaps more to stop the terrible noise than anything else. Her wet leather shoes went out from under her and I heard the terrible sound of her head hitting the metal cleat on the dock. By the time I got down to the lake, there was nothing I could do for either one of them. Tammy arrived just a few seconds after I did and she helped me pull Noel out of the lake and lay him face up on the dock. I hauled Tyler in and yelled at Tammy to take him up to

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the cottage and to call 911. I didn't want either one of them to have to watch me conducting my futile examination for vital signs.

When I was finished I straightened the bodies until they were stretched out side by side on the rough planks, mother and son, their sightless eyes staring up at the clear blue sky of a perfect summer day.

It's late now and I'm going to try to get some sleep before tomorrow's inquest. I thought writing this down would help me get my thoughts in order before I have to testify about my part in the tragedies at the Shanks' cottage.

I'm tired out and my handwriting is getting shaky. I've already written two letters tonight and they're just waiting to be mailed as soon as I can get to the post office. The first is a note to my son saying I'm prepared to move into that retirement home he's found for me. The second is my letter of resignation to the College of Family Physicians telling them it's high time they found another doctor for Random Falls. Someone young, preferably. Someone who'll stick to patching up bodies and won't be tempted to meddle in patients' lives. ●

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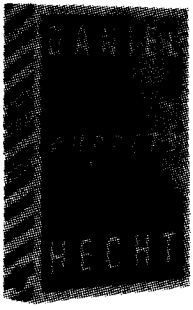

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Art by Allen Davis

The Theft of the Rumpled Road Map

by Edward D. Hoch

As a small child, Sandra Paris believed the city had been named after her. She always imagined the excitement of her first visit there. But when it finally happened, in the company of her mother at age thirteen, it wasn't much of an event at all. Her parents were recently divorced, and the trip to Paris was a poor consolation for the loss of a father.

Now, returning in these early years of the twenty-first century, the city seemed different, more alive to her, and even with the constant threat of terrorism there was an aura of gaiety about it. The September streets still sparkled with summer sunshine. She felt young and alive once more, though perhaps that was only because she was about to steal ten million dollars in diamonds.

Every two years, in a subterranean gallery beneath the Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel, a syndicate of antique dealers held a spectacular show where everything was for sale. The security was tight, but not tight enough to stop Sandra Paris and the accom-

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plices she'd hired to assist her. She'd visited the gallery twice earlier in the week, establishing that there were no visible video cameras in the booth of August Fain Antiques, nor were the display cases rigged with alarms. She had confirmed this by asking to examine a piece of jewelry from one of the locked cases. The booth was quite large, about the size of a small hotel room, and was staffed by two saleswomen. A single security guard stood by the entrance. Sandra calculated that she needed four helpers, three to divert the guard and each of the salespeople at the proper mo-ment, and one outside to take the diamonds from her.

She was waiting when the show opened at nine on Monday morning, before she had breakfast, and she paid her admission fee of ten euros to stroll through the dimly lit halls. She'd always worked best on an empty stomach. Never glancing at her three inside accomplices, she walked directly to the Fain Antiques booth and entered. The room filled quickly with browsers, and at exactly twelve minutes after nine she stopped before a locked case containing a white diamond nearly the size of her thumb and a second smaller blue diamond. Across the booth, a middle-aged gentleman was asking a saleswoman for a catalog while a young dark-haired woman inquired about the price of a gold necklace. At the door, a young man with a Russian accent was asking the security guard the way to the men's room.

Sandra Paris sprang the lock at the bottom of the display case with a metal paint scraper and lifted the lid just far enough to grab the two diamonds and replace them with her calling card: *The White Queen—Impossible Things Before Breakfast.* No one noticed her. If they had, her accomplices would have caused a diversion to allow her escape.

She was on the Rue de Rivoli within minutes. A man with a briefcase, hurrying along, bumped into her as planned and she passed him the diamonds. If they came after her and caught her now, she'd be clean.

But Sandra's troubles were just beginning.

That was the story as Sandra Paris related it to Nick Velvet over dinner in the Grande Salle of Le Train Bleu four days later. He'd

Edward D. Hoch's most popular series, about Nick Velvet, the professional thief who steals only objects of no value, is once again under option for TV. In this new installment in the series, Nick is called in to help his friend the White Queen, a thief whose motto is "impossible things before breakfast." The robbery that forms the setup to this story nearly duplicates an actual robbery that occurred in Paris in October, 2004.

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flown over from New York the previous night in response to her urgent phone call. Their relationship had shifted back and forth over the years, sometimes adversaries, often friends. Less than a year earlier he'd been hired to steal something from her in New York. Now, in Paris, she needed him to steal something *for* her.

"Sandra," Nick said with a sigh, "I've told you before that it's foolish to leave your calling card. The police immediately know who to look for."

"Anyone could leave that card, simply to implicate me. The police know that. In something like this, they'd suspect me anyway if they knew I was in town."

"All right. Tell me the rest of it."

"The man who bumped into me on the Rue de Rivoli and took possession of the diamonds was a Russian named Boris Kempov. I'd worked with him before and trusted him completely. He had a small package addressed and ready. The plan was for him to place the diamonds in the package and mail it to himself in care of general delivery at a post office in the south of France. Even I didn't know where they were going. He would drive down there, and if the police stopped him he'd be clean. He'd collect the diamonds and phone me that all was clear. It was a perfect plan, only Boris never left Paris. They fished his body from the Seine two days ago."

"The diamonds are gone?"

She nodded. "The diamonds are gone, already mailed before he was killed. Someone, perhaps one of my accomplices, killed him. I need your help to get back the diamonds."

"You know I never steal anything of value. Diamonds worth ten million dollars are certainly valuable."

"I'm not asking you to steal the diamonds." She paused as the waiter arrived with their *andouillette,* a specialty of Le Train Bleu. When he'd departed, she continued, "I want you to steal a road map from his car. I know he always marked the route before starting off on a journey. If I have the map I'll know where he mailed my diamonds."

Nick didn't bother pointing out that the diamonds weren't exactly hers. "I don't know," he hedged.

"Please, Nick. Do this for me. I'll pay double your usual fee."

He hadn't come all this distance to turn her down. "Where is his car now?"

"The police identified the body through his driver's license and passport. On the body were his car keys. They found the car parked nearby and towed it away."

"Perhaps the diamonds were never mailed."

"They were mailed. He phoned me Monday night to say the package was on its way. He planned to leave the city Tuesday morning to drive there."

"But he still didn't say where it was?"

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She shook her head. "He was very careful, especially when talking on the phone. He told me nothing, but I trusted him completely."

"Do you think whoever killed him learned the secret?"

"I doubt it. But the route would be on his map."

Nick finished the *andouillette.* "It was very good. Thanks for dinner."

"We're not done yet. They have fabulous desserts here."

On Saturday morning Nick quickly located the city lot where impounded cars were towed. Like those back in the States, it was encircled by a high wire fence with a gatekeeper on duty. Nick knew a little French, but he was more comfortable when the uniformed guard switched to English. "You must have an authorization from the police to remove a car," he declared, putting down the newspaper he was reading. "No exceptions."

"I don't want to remove it. I simply want to see it." He produced a suitable business card showing him to be the Paris claims investigator for an international insurance firm. "The owner's body was recovered from the Seine and his estate needs to know if the car was damaged in any way. It's strictly routine."

"Sorry. I'd have to accompany you and I can't leave the gate until my relief gets here."

"When will that be?"

"I get a break at ten-thirty."

That was only twenty minutes. "Can I wait?"

The guard shrugged and went back to his newspaper.

When his relief showed up in twenty minutes they spoke quickly in French, glancing at Nick. "Come this way," the first guard said in English. "Leave your car here. We have to walk."

Nick followed him down the line of French cars, broken here and there by a variety of foreign models. A Mercedes convertible nestled against a Fiat Panda, and a surprising Chevrolet was wedged between an MG and a Toyota. Presently the guard stopped and motioned toward a black Honda. "This is it."

Nick took out a little digital camera and snapped a photo of the car's rear end. "Could we move it out so I can get a better shot of the left side?"

"We don't have keys. The owner brings them when he claims the car."

"The owner's dead and the police have the keys," Nick explained. "Can't you call someone to move it?"

"No."

"Look," he said with a sigh, "I'm just doing my job. I have to get pictures of the car from all angles. Go to your phone and call someone. You have my card. Tell them who I am."

It took another minute or two of persuasion but the man finally

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agreed to make a call, insisting all the while that it would be a waste of time. As soon as he started back to the gatehouse, out of sight for a few moments, Nick used an electronic lock pick to unlock the car door quickly. Luckily it was not an expensive vehicle with factory-installed security alarms. There was nothing on the front seat except a crumpled cigarette pack. He popped open the glove compartment and there was a stained and rumpled road map of France. He unfolded it enough to see a route highlighted in pink, a straight line southeast from Paris to Chambery, then slipped it under his jacket.

Nick was outside the locked car when the guard returned a moment later. "No luck," he announced. "The car cannot be moved."

"Thanks for asking, anyway," Nick told him. He snapped a couple more pictures to make it look good and then accompanied the guard back to the gate.

He phoned Sandra Paris on her cell phone and told her he had the goods. "That was fast," she said.

"Where can I meet you?"

She hesitated, then asked, "Do you know the print sellers along the Quai de Montebello?"

"I'll find them."

"Two o'clock?"

"Fine."

The pavements along the Seine were crowded with Saturday-afternoon strollers, many of them poring over the crammed cases of the print sellers, their stalls so close together that Nick could barely catch a glimpse of the tour boats passing on the river. Presently he spotted Sandra, wandering among the stalls with a bushy-haired young man whose wool jacket seemed a bit heavy for the mild September weather. She was wearing a dark wig, but he'd have known her anywhere. "Hello there," he said casually, walking up beside her. "Finding any good prints?"

"Nick! I didn't know you were in Paris! This is Royal Herzen, a friend of mine."

They shook hands and Herzen bowed slightly. When he spoke, Nick detected a distinct Russian accent. "Are you enjoying Paris, Mr. Nick?"

"It's a lovely city."

Sandra spoke up. "Royal, will you pardon us for a moment? I must ask Nick about a mutual friend."

"Certainly." He smiled and moved away.

"Do you have the map?" she asked Nick.

"Of course."

"The destination . . . ?"

"He marked a route to Chambery, at the edge of the French Alps."

"That makes sense. He told me once he did ice climbing around there in the winter. Waterfalls on some of the rivers freeze over

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and people actually climb them with ice axes and crampons."

"That sounds dangerous."

She shrugged. "No more dangerous than stealing diamonds from the center of Paris. In this business, you meet people willing to take risks."

"I'm glad I could help you," he said, thinking he should be on his way as soon as she paid the promised fee.

Sandra glanced over at Royal Herzen. "Nick, I have a problem. Herzen is one of the people I hired. He distracted the security guard while I took the diamonds. Now he wants his cut and he's sticking with me until he gets it."

"Nothing wrong with that. We all want what's coming to us."

"What if he killed Kempov? He might kill me, too, as soon as we retrieve the diamonds."

Nick smiled and shook his head. "Didn't you check his references before you hired him?"

"Nick, this isn't a joking matter. Will you come with us to Chambery?"

"As what? Your bodyguard?"

"There are worse things you could do with your time. I'm paying you double for the road map, remember. But none of us gets anything until the diamonds are recovered and a deal is completed to sell them."

"Where are they going?"

"Probably Eastern Europe or Russia. Stones this big cannot be sold as they are. They'll be recut for bracelets and necklaces. Such items find a ready market among wealthy Arab oilmen."

"How would you explain my presence to Royal?"

"I'll tell him we're old lovers. He'll understand."

"I hope Gloria does, back home."

"Then you'll do it?"

"I've never been to Chambery. I'd like to see it."

Whatever story Sandra told Royal Herzen was easily accepted, and he even offered to help with the driving as they set off for the small city in southeast France. It was a journey of some 600 kilometers, nearly 400 miles, and starting out in the late afternoon, Nick knew they'd have to stop overnight along the way.

"That's all right," Sandra decided, "so long as we're out of Paris. The post office at Chambery won't be open till Monday morning anyway."

The French countryside in early autumn is a wondrous place, and before they'd completed half their journey Nick knew he'd have to return someday with Gloria. They passed vineyards along the way that produced wine mainly for regional consumption, and it was at one of these that they spent the night in a guesthouse adjoining the vineyard's small restaurant. Nick gallantly gave

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Sandra the bed and slept on the room's lumpy couch. In the morning they discovered that Herzen had not taken a room for himself but had slept in the car, covering himself with a blanket he bought in the vineyard gift shop.

"He didn't want us leaving without him," Sandra decided. They had breakfast in the little restaurant and bought a few bottles of wine to take along. Nick wondered if wine sales on a Sunday morning were legal in France but he didn't ask. As they pulled out of the village, they could hear church bells ringing.

Herzen had taken the wheel when they were about two hours outside of Chambery, claiming a familiarity with the highway. "I was here for a trade fair last year," he told them. "It is very easy to steal things at trade fairs. Once you have the right credentials, they let you go anywhere."

They reached Chambery in the early afternoon and found a town that seemed firmly split between new and old, like so many European places. The old town was a maze of arches and alleyways in the shadow of the former castle of the dukes of Savoie. The newer area, centered on the Place Saint-Leger, featured a hotel, outdoor cafes, and small shops. Tourists were plentiful on a Sunday afternoon.

Nick and Sandra booked a room on the second floor of the hotel, but Herzen made it clear he'd be sleeping in the car again. "This is a good hotel," he told them. "I have stayed here before, but not tonight. We are too close to our goal."

"I wish you'd be a bit more trustful, Royal," Sandra told him. "We're not going to drive off in the car without the diamonds."

"What if they're not here?"

"They'll be here," Sandra assured him. "The post office opens at eight o'clock and we'll collect the package then."

"Before breakfast," Nick added.

She glanced at him. "Of course, before breakfast."

But something unexpected awaited them in the hotel lobby. A middle-aged man and a dark-haired young woman came forward to meet them. They were both well dressed and Nick immediately pegged them for police. Before he could devise a quick exit strategy, Sandra greeted them with some surprise. "What are you two doing here?" she asked.

It was the man who spoke. "You weren't forgetting about us, were you, dear lady?"

"Of course not. I don't have the package yet. I intended to phone you both as soon as I made contact with the buyer." Then she remembered to make introductions. "Nick, this is Jax LePage and Marci Whitmore. They helped me out in Paris."

"How are you, Nick?" the young woman said with a British accent, shaking his hand. LePage's accent was a bit harder to place. He could have been French. He seemed friendly enough, if one avoided the steely gaze of his cold blue eyes.

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"What about Royal?" he asked Sandra now.

"He's outside in the car. He drove down with us. Tell me how you found this place."

"We had messages from Boris Kempov," the British woman replied. "He told us where he'd mailed the diamonds."

"I had no message," Sandra told her.

"Perhaps he didn't know your address."

"He phoned me on my cell after he mailed the diamonds. He was to call me after they arrived."

"Do you really believe that?" LePage asked. "Would anyone trust diamonds that valuable to the French postal system? Boris would have hidden them somewhere in his car."

Sandra still had faith in Kempov. "We'll know in the morning," she said. "If he mailed the package Monday in Paris it should be here by now."

"We'll see," LePage agreed. Royal Herzen came in to join them and all five had dinner together. Sandra made no effort to explain Nick's presence, but the conversation was kept to harmless patter.

When they were alone Nick asked, "How much are they getting?"

Sandra sighed. "I promised them a million each, if we can really clear ten million."

"In dollars?"

"I think in dollars. They're starting to think in euros, with the exchange rate what it is."

Sandra had the bed and Nick slept on the couch as they had done in the last hotel. "No complications," she told him. "We've known each other so long, it would be like sleeping with my brother."

Somewhere in the night he was aware that she was up and moving about, but he drifted back to sleep.

They'd arranged to meet the others in the lobby at eight, retrieve the package from the post office, and then go to breakfast. Only Jax LePage was there on time, looking annoyed. "Where are the others?" he asked.

"I'll phone Marci's room," Sandra offered, but just then she came down the stairs to join them.

"Am I late?"

"Herzen's not here yet," Sandra told her. "Nick, do you want to see if he's still asleep in the car?"

Nick went out the back door to the parking area. Even from a distance he could see the Russian slumped over in the backseat beneath a blanket. It seemed like an uncomfortable sleeping position. He tried the doors and they were locked. He rapped on the windows, but Herzen didn't respond. Finally he went back inside and asked Sandra for her car keys. "What is it?" she asked.

"I don't know."

But he did know. He'd seen enough dead bodies in his life. Sometime during the night one of them had killed Royal Herzen.

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Herzen had been strangled by a wire around his neck. Sandra Paris came out to view the body and asked, "The doors were locked?"

Nick nodded. "That means he knew his killer and let him in. Afterward, the killer locked the car door as he left."

"That narrows it down. Jax and Marci are the only people here that he knew."

"What about the buyer you had lined up?"

"I hadn't even contacted him yet. He'd have no idea where we were."

"There's another possibility besides those two. Did you kill him, Sandra?"

She stared at him. "You're kidding."

"I heard you moving around during the night."

"I went to the bathroom. I never left our room."

"You were upset that he was making the trip with us, afraid that he might kill us."

"And you think I killed him first?"

"Sandra, I don't know! I'm asking you to tell me the truth."

"He probably picked up a prostitute during the night and she did him in."

"Prostitutes don't usually garrote their customers," Nick said, frisking the dead man. "And his wallet's still in his pocket." He threw the blanket over the body, hiding it from view. "We don't want him found right away, and we'd better not tell the others."

"One of them knows already."

"Maybe," he admitted. "It's after eight, Sandra. You'd better go for your package."

"It's not my package, remember? Kempov mailed it to himself. Can you be him?"

"What do I use for identification?"

"He was an expert at faking passports. I have two of them in his name. All we need is a picture of you. We find a place with a color copier, copy the photo in your passport, and laminate it onto one of Kempov's passports."

"That's what you needed me for. It wasn't to protect you from Royal Herzen."

"It was both. I didn't trust the man."

Nick knew he was in too deep to refuse her now. "Let's see those passports."

She popped open the trunk of the car and lifted the mat that covered the spare-tire compartment. From inside the tire itself she removed a packet wrapped in plastic. Hesitating, she asked, "Nick, could you turn your back for a moment? I have some extra passports for myself that I'd just as soon you didn't see."

He smiled. "I thought we were partners."

"You know better than that. I can't show you all my secrets."

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He turned away while Sandra removed two passports from her packet. Both were perfect specimens, with Kempov's name and photo. One was Swiss, the other Polish. "The new American passports are almost impossible to alter or copy," he told her, "but I still have an old one. I think I can copy the picture from it and paste it over Kempov's photo. Let's give it a try."

Chambery was indeed a town that catered to trade fairs and conferences. A forthcoming film festival was advertised in the window of a copier and office-supply shop that was already open for business. The color copier was self-service, producing a perfect duplicate of his passport photo within seconds. A little careful work with a pen shaded the top of the photo where the government seal overlapped it. The shop also offered a laminating machine for convention ID badges and he used that to cover the photo after he'd affixed it to the passport.

"It's not the first time you've done that," Sandra commented as she watched him work.

"I did something similar in Hawaii once, not with a passport, though. This isn't perfect, but it might work for a quick glance."

"Suppose they didn't have a shop like this?"

"Then you'd have had to pay me to steal your box from the post office."

"You could do that?"

"Oh, sure." He reconsidered and added, "But not with diamonds inside."

LePage and the woman had found them by then. "Did you get it?" Marci Whitmore wanted to know. "And where's Herzen?"

"Dead in the backseat of my car," Sandra told her. "Strangled sometime during the night."

"Who would do such a thing?" the dark-haired woman asked.

Sandra turned to her. "Almost any of us, Marci, if we thought it would increase our share."

LePage was growing nervous. "Let's stop these accusations and go get the diamonds."

Sandra nodded. "That's Nick's job."

He set off for the post office with the doctored passport, knowing they'd be watching. He also knew that LePage might be right. Would Kempov really have entrusted the diamonds to the French postal service?

The postal clerk accepted the passport as identification and produced a small cardboard box addressed to Boris Kempov. It had been mailed from Paris the previous Monday, postmarked at 9:05 A.M. As Nick walked back to the car park where Sandra and the others waited, he jiggled the box a little but heard no movement inside.

"Any problem?" Sandra asked.

He glanced at the other two. "No problem."

"I guess I was wrong to doubt him," LePage admitted.

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"Open it," Marci urged.

Sandra shook her head. "Not here in the middle of a car park. We'll go back to the hotel."

That was when the gun appeared as if by magic in Jax LePage's hand. It was a small Berretta automatic, aimed at a spot between Sandra and Nick. "No," he said. "We're taking the box right now."

Marci moved to his side. "We're not ending up like Royal did." She reached out and took the box from Nick's unresisting hands.

"I wouldn't do that," he warned. "It's not safe."

But they were already backing away toward their own vehicle. As they broke into a run, Sandra shouted, "Nick, go after them!"

When he didn't move, she started after them herself but Nick held her back. "Don't, Sandra! Let them have it. The diamonds aren't in there."

"What?"

"The postmark shows Kempov mailed it minutes before you stole them."

She stopped struggling and stared at the escaping car as it pulled onto the road and headed back the way they'd come. "But what does that mean?"

The answer came with a flash and roar as flames enveloped the car. "It means there was a bomb in that box meant to kill you all," he answered when they could get their breath. "It means that Boris Kempov is still alive."

"How can you know that?" Sandra asked as they headed back to the hotel, avoiding the main road filling quickly with police and fire vehicles.

"Because he wouldn't have trusted the mails. Because the postmark shows he sent that package before you'd stolen the diamonds. Because he rigged a bomb in it to go off when the package was opened. Because he was an expert at forging passports and could easily have faked the passport and driver's license used to identify that body in the Seine. Because he lured us here with a straight line drawn on a road map, indicating a route a child could have followed without the necessity of a map."

"And to think that I trusted him!" They passed an ambulance on its way to the burning car. "Did he kill Royal, too?"

"Almost certainly. And that means he followed us down here to make certain we were all dead."

"Why not just take the diamonds and run?"

"And have you and the others tracking him down forever? He wanted to enjoy that ten million without worrying."

"But we're still alive."

"Exactly. He won't be safe until he kills us, too."

Sandra's first impulse was to head back to Paris without returning to the hotel, but Nick argued against it. "We both left things

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that could be traced to us. And if we just disappear without checking out that might raise suspicions, too. Let's clean out the room and pay our bill. Then we'll be on our way."

They parked by the hotel and went directly to their room. As Nick was unlocking the door some sixth sense seemed to warn him, but not quickly enough. He walked into the room to confront a man he'd never seen before, holding a 9mm. pistol pointed at his chest.

"Boris!" Sandra gasped. "You're alive!"

"I guess you knew that already," he told her. "I'm sorry our partnership has to end like this. I need my passports."

She ran over to him, ignoring the gun. "You've saved my life! This man is trying to steal the diamonds. I think he killed Royal and the others."

"I killed Royal," he told her. "I was watching this place last night when all of a sudden he popped out of a car right next to me. He was going to tell everyone I was still alive."

But by that time she was on him. Faster than Nick could follow, she shoved the gun aside as he pulled the trigger. The shot shattered the window but in a split-second Boris Kempov was on the ground and Sandra had the gun. "You're good," Nick complimented her.

"Not quite good enough. That shot will bring the police."

And indeed it did. Within minutes the gendarmes had converged on the hotel, perhaps seeking some connection with the nearby car bombing. Sandra said the man was a stranger to her, caught in the act of robbing their hotel room. For his part, Kempov said nothing. Within an hour they'd located his car and found a small quantity of plastic explosives in the trunk. They did a thorough search after that, and turned up two large diamonds in the gas tank. "Stolen in Paris a week ago," the police captain told Sandra with a sense of triumph, no doubt looking forward longingly to a promotion.

"They could have arrested us," Nick said, trying to look at the bright side of things as they headed back to Paris. "At least Kempov kept quiet."

"So far. We'd better be on our way home before he decides to tell the whole story."

"Sorry about the diamonds. I guess you're out your ten million."

"And you're out your fee."

"Why? I stole the road map for you, didn't I? That's what you hired me for."

But she only shook her head. "When we get back home I'll take you and Gloria out to dinner. That's the best I can do."

Nick sighed. "You owe me, Sandra. One of these days, when your finances are better, I'll remind you of that road map." ●

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BURYING THE PAST

by Judith Cutler

"It'll be simple," Mary urged me. "What better legacy can I leave you than escape from that man?"

It's hard to resist the deathbed wishes of a dearly loved older sister, particularly when they echo your own deep-felt urges. I mulled them over as I sat in the dispiriting little cell that was all the NHS could afford for its psychotherapists, watching the doctor dig out my notes. A fairly thick file now. My previous therapist had had the decency to mug up on my problems beforehand. I found this physical reminder of all I'd said—or, more accurately, not said—particularly unnerving. I was supposed to be here for a free and frank dialogue, so I told him so.

"Exactly! That's why I'm doing it; just to get you to communicate with me." His anxious eyes shone in his thin face: He always looked so concerned for me, though he might simply have been worrying about the effect on his life of his student debts. "Unless and until you bring out into the open the terrible thing that happened to you, I can't possibly help you."

"It didn't *happen* to me," I said. "Everyone says it was *done* to me. Quite different. And I can't survive if I think about it. It's one thing to be denied the prospect of ever having a normal sexual relationship, let alone having all my hopes of children completely destroyed. It's quite another to talk about my feelings towards the man who—" I stopped.

"Please. Try to go on."

I shook my head firmly.

"The ostrich technique never works," he pleaded.

If that was true, it was a pity. Because that was precisely what I wanted to do: bury my head in the sand and not come up, even for breath. Ever.

Judith Cutler is the author of nearly two dozen novels, the most recent to see U.S. publication being *Staying Power* (St. Martin's / June 2004). Two other new Cutler titles are available from her U.K. publisher, Allison & Busby: See *The Food Detective* (August 2005) and *Scar Tissue* (August 2005). Ms. Cutler has contributed several previous stories to *EQMM*. She lives in Canterbury, England. ¶

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My sister's suggestion was a modified version of this. She wanted me to take her place. Oh, not literally. Not in her sickbed in the hospice. Though I would have done, if I could. At thirty-six, she had so much to live for; I, though two years her junior, had so very, very little now. Outside, the early daffodils and narcissi planted to cheer people in her situation bobbed in the pale sun. I doubt if she could even see them by now. She, who'd always loved her garden, her organic vegetable plot, even her compost heap, as if they were children, was denied even that solace.

"It won't take much to change the name on the death certificate from Mary to Margaret. Not with Dr. Terry's handwriting. It's lucky we had such unimaginative parents, isn't it?" A rictus contracted her face. I knew it was meant for a smile. "So then you're officially dead. You testify to a solicitor that you want to change your name by deed poll—oh, some whim of mine—and you sell your house and move into mine. You become me, miraculously in remission. You're pale and thin enough these days, goodness knows, to look as if you've been very ill. Come on, we've pretended to be each other often enough in the past. None of our boyfriends could ever tell our voices apart on the phone. But the moment you can, you sell my house. And move again. Cover your tracks. I want to make sure that both Margaret and Mary Lovett have completely disappeared from the face of the earth. Maybe he'll send a friend to heaven to look there—and seek him in the other place himself! Oh, Margaret, do you remember the last time we saw *Hamlet* together . . ."

We talked actors and acting till I thought she'd drifted back into what passed for sleep those days. But suddenly her hand fluttered onto my wrist, her urgent grasp surprisingly fierce. "Remember what he said in court? As they took him down?"

I shook my head.

"Oh, Margaret—surely you remember the expression on his face. He meant it. He'll hunt you down as soon as he's out."

No, it was all mercifully hidden, behind that nice thick curtain of amnesia.

"In that case, you'll just have to trust me," she said. "And next time you come, bring your National Trust booklet and a road map. We'll decide where you're going to move to. It'll be ever such fun."

Whatever else I might or might not do, I couldn't deny her such a simple pleasure, when she had so few others left. I obeyed.

I thought she'd abandoned her weird notion, because for the next few days we talked not about where I might move to, but simply about the places we'd been. Bleak East Anglia for Felbrigg and Blickling; the affluent South for Bodiam and Sissinghurst; the West Country of our family holidays for Lanhydrock and Cotehele. But there were some places she'd never managed to reach, and her face would cloud as she drowsed off.

One day, just after I'd left her and was at home making a lonely

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cup of tea, the hospice called me. Mary had lapsed into a coma and was not expected to live. Leaving the tea where it was, I got into the still-warm car.

Her doctor was writing notes as I rushed into Reception. How anyone could ever decipher such a scrawl, goodness knew. He caught me looking at it and flushed with embarrassed amusement. "I know. One day I'll learn proper calligraphy. Now, Margaret, your sister was very worried about something. She got very agitated. So I promised to give you a message. It didn't mean anything to me. It may not to you."

Bother messages. I wanted to be with her as long as she breathed.

He called after me, "We've given her the maximum medication. You'll find her very quiet and peaceful now. There's not long to go."

I darted into her room. The doctor had been right. It was only a short vigil. She who'd been such a fighter seemed glad to give up now.

As I was leaving, to my shame more exhausted than upset, the doctor stopped me.

"You never asked me what the message was. She said, 'Start at Dunstanburgh.' That's all. 'Start at Dunstanburgh.'"

I shook my head. No, it didn't make any sense at all. After Mary's death, nothing did. Zombielike, I simply carried out her last requests.

Lovely as Northumberland was, it was too bleak for me, and I felt my Midlands accent made me much too noticeable. But I stuck it out in my rented cottage, getting work temping as and when I could: We'd both got secretarial qualifications. Meanwhile, the house I'd actually bought near Oxford was getting more and more valuable as prices in the M4 Corridor ballooned. The solitary existence enabled me to grow into my new identity and to develop a side of Mary I'd never really appreciated—her green fingers. If she could turn a tip into a garden, so could I. But she'd never had to contend with the late frosts and icy winds from the North Sea. My neighbours tutted with sympathy at the skeletal little remains of hebes and lavenders I'd so optimistically planted, and recommended hardier species for next year. But there wouldn't be a next year. I'd do as Mary had told me—a quick flit. One autumn day I was there, the next I was battling with an early blizzard down the A1.

Not to Oxford, though. I'd sold that house at such a profit I managed to afford a bijou flat in that most anonymous of places, London's Docklands. I'd make my balconies—yes, I had two, one west, one south-facing—testaments to the joys of container gardening. There wouldn't have been time for more, quite honestly, as I'd landed a full-time job in the City, earning silly money for looking efficient and being thin, two things I did quite well. Officially I

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was PA to some man in red braces. In fact, I spent most of my time sobering him up. Without ever even sailing near the wind of insider trading, I learned enough about shares to acquire a portfolio, bits and pieces of which I was constantly selling; in six months I'd made enough from my job, my shares, and the rocketing values of the flat to be glad to escape from the pigeons which turned my little gardens from Eden into a grey-and-white patchwork. Maybe I should have kept the flat—the views up and across the Thames to Greenwich were an unfailing delight to a provincial woman like me—but I could see that slowly but inexorably the property boom was slowing. So I bought two places, one near Carcassonne, the other in Cheshire. Mary would have loved Little Moreton Hall and Erddig, but would probably have turned her nose up at the industrial wonders of Quarry Bank Mill. Mary? I mean, my late sister Margaret, of course.

The West Midlands; the East Midlands. Each time I moved I made a bit more profit, enough to try the Cotswolds again. There was so much to see there I stayed long enough to become a mature student at Oxford Brooks University, and become a qualified teacher. A new job and then a promotion took me to schools in different locations—Herefordshire and Hampshire. And then I moved into Dorset, where we'd always planned to see Max Gate and Verities, as headmistress of a village school. On paper, the village was called Wheelbarrow Town. In fact, it was a disorganised jumble of cottages sprawling along a common on one side and deep fertile valley on the other, and no one ever called it anything except Wilberton.

However hard they had to work these days, teachers earned a decent salary, and I was able to outbid affluent city types wanting a holiday home for three weeks a year. I wanted my neglected Georgian rectory, just beyond the village boundary, for far more than that. I wanted it to live in forever and ever, enough to sell the cottage in France to raise the funds to buy it and restore the roof and the garden walls.

Secure in my latest existence, and comfortable in the weight and odd grey hairs of a woman in her mid forties, at last I could allow myself to become part of the community I'd settled in. I joined things like the gardening society, tried hard to ring church bells, and started a music club hiring a minibus to take us into Bournemouth for symphony concerts. My school, once a run-down building with outside lavatories and depressed staff, benefited from an anonymous donation (the remains of the Carcassonne fund, of course) which built a new main block with not just lavatories but a computer room and a gym. Soon parents were queuing up to enroll their children. The Secretary of State for Education came down in person to congratulate us on our academic and sporting success. We were headline news on not just local but national TV.

The strange thing was that the happier I became, the more I started to get mysterious dreams. Nothing more than frightening

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fragments at first. I'd wake sweating with fear, impelled to check all my windows were locked. In the cold light of day I cursed myself for a fool, but nonetheless got my intruder alarm system upgraded. The young man installing it looked bemused—there was nothing of any value in the house.

"No." I smiled. "All my gold is in the garden. Look." I pointed to the sea of daffodils in the orchard. I might have been waving to my sister.

For the first time, I felt able to try my hand at truly organic vegetables. Friends from the gardening society had got me started on a compost heap as soon as I moved in. There was enough room in the garden for a couple of modern converters, too, the sort you turn regularly to oxygenate the humus. Now they advised me on how to plant my cabbages and beans. Double digging and lots of lime for the former, they said. As for the latter, I'd long suspected there was more to it than simply popping beans into pots and transplanting them so they'd grow up rickety poles. I was right: I had to dig a deep trench—at least eighteen inches was the kindliest recommendation, though some insisted on nearer three feet—and fill the bottom with rich compost. Then I was to put in a layer of crumpled newspaper, then a layer of bone meal, and finally more compost. I was to soak the lot thoroughly before replacing the earth. I may have pulled a face, but I knew I had to do it: This crop wasn't for me, Marion Lovage, but for a woman I'd loved years ago called Mary Lovett. Poor Mary. I might once have become her, but now I seemed to be outgrowing her. There were certainly many days when I was simply too busy at school to think of her. And she'd certainly not had the ambition that had driven me to find this sort of identity.

Or the reason that lay behind my moves. My nightmares lasted longer each time. Any time now I'd recall the incident that had set all this in train.

By now my screams woke me. I went so far as to get my GP to make me an appointment with a psychotherapist. The NHS being what it was, it would be weeks before he could see me.

While I waited, I immersed myself in work, both for the school and in the garden. A bright day in the Easter holidays told me the time had come. This was the day of the trench. Then I'd lime the cabbage patch.

Because the ground had long since lain fallow, one of my gardener friends had lent me a pickaxe, but I soon set it aside in the long grass. A few minutes with the spade showed that I was working friable loam. It probably didn't need all the enrichment I'd provided, but once I'd set my hand to the plough, as it were, there was no turning back. The trench grew with reassuring speed, deeper, wider, longer. When I'd refilled it and all the soil had settled, I'd make a strong wooden frame like my neighbours', one lasting for

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many years and many crops of beans all as long as your arm. Yes, it was hard work. But I was very fit after a winter of digging and barrowing and enjoyed every minute. I was sweating hard in the noonday sun when I heard the footsteps on the gravel path. It was that sound that finally broke all my nightmares. I was back in that quiet suburban cemetery, taking a shortcut on a warm summer's night because the last bus had broken down and it would be quicker to walk home than to wait for the replacement. The footsteps had been swift. In my silly summer shoes I couldn't run, but toppled headlong onto a Victorian grave.

Sacred to the memory of Thomas Parkinson, JP
Born 1815
Taken to the bosom of our Lord, 1877
And to his dearly beloved wife,
Anna, 1820–1840,
And his second wife,
Elizabeth Jane,
Mother of
Herbert, both taken to a better place in 1842
IN THEE WE TRUST

Goodness knew how many times I read it, learning it by heart, as you can see, much as I doubted the sentiment—anything to take my mind off what that man was doing to me. And then he flung me over onto my back, and started all over again. That was his mistake. He let me see his face. And his tattoos. And his cold, hard eyes.

His eyes were still hard but burning hot as he turned in court as they went to take him down—life, for aggravated rape—and pointed to me. "I'll be even with you for this. When I get out I'll finish the job. I'll kill you."

The face before me now had aged as much as mine had, but where mine was tanned and healthy, his was pale, with the sort of pallor that brought Mary to my mind. Prison pallor. His eyes were cold again. His tattoos moved as the muscles under them shifted: he was taking a firmer grip on his weapon of choice, an empty bottle. Then it had been beer, now it was wine. He said nothing. He didn't need to. Fuddled as he might be with the wine, his intention was all too obvious.

As before, I screamed. As before, he laughed. This time he added, "You can holler all you like. Place in the wilds like this—who's to hear?"

"The neighbours—" I blustered.

"No neighbours for miles, are there? And you don't suppose I exactly advertised my presence. I've got a nice little alibi already set up. So you might as well face it. I'm going to finish what I started all those years ago before you had me sent down."

The headmistress in me spoke. "I don't know who you are or

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what you're talking about. And how can you have a perfect alibi?"

He snorted with laughter. "That stately home down the road—"

"Yes. Verities—"

"I got one of those timed tickets. Went in with the second party. Slipped out. No one will admit to having missed me—too bloody proud of their security."

"Your family—friends—"

"You're joking!"

Yes, he looked as if he'd been sleeping rough.

"How did you find me?" I took a step back.

"Easy: You were on the bloody box, weren't you?"

With every word he'd inched nearer. And I inched further back. But not straight back. I drifted sideways, towards the grass. Resigned, I said, "Let's get it over with, then, shall we?"

The bean row looked remarkably professional. I could be proud of myself. It ran true and straight, with strong posts at each end supporting well-seasoned branches for the young plants to climb. George, the gardening-club friend who'd lent me the pickaxe, awarded me ten out of ten when he came to collect his property.

He raised an eyebrow when I presented him with a new one. I'd bought it at the same time as I'd bought a new load of lime.

"It wasn't quite up to the job of breaking up those old greenhouse foundations," I laughed, pointing at the mess of brick ends. Had I really checked if I'd got all the hair and bloodstains from the original one? And, in case I hadn't, taken it with me to a head-teachers' conference in Derbyshire, and en route dropped the pieces in a landfill site? Surely I must have dreamt it. And why had I needed more lime? What had I spread the first lot on, if not on the garden? It wasn't the sort of thing you spread in bean trenches, not unless you wanted something to rot down quickly.

"You'd need a contractor for that," George protested. "I know you women claim you can do everything, but you have to draw the line somewhere."

He was right. I did. I knew I'd have to stop all this racketing around the country, and put down roots at last. I had to stay here for as long as I lived. Probably I was relieved, but after so many years on the move, I might get itchy feet, and what then? No, I couldn't trust anyone else to look after my house and garden, that was sure, and I certainly couldn't put it on the market, ever. Not in my lifetime.

My decision made, I phoned the doctor to cancel the psychotherapy appointment. I'd managed to resolve my problems, I said. Finally. I'd faced the cause of my fears, just like it said in the self-help books, and dealt with it.

I didn't add that there was one matter I couldn't resolve. I couldn't ever fancy any of the beans. I might have buried the past, but eating it was another matter. ●

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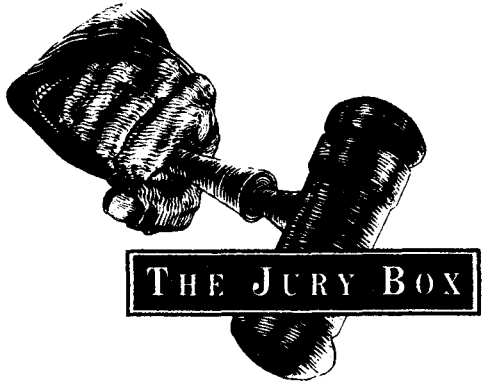

by Jon L. Breen

Among mystery writing married couples (such as Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy, William L. DeAndrea and Jane Haddam, Michael Collins and Gayle Lynds, Jonathan Kellerman and Faye Kellerman), Ross Macdonald and Margaret Millar have a unique distinction: both were recipients of the Mystery Writers of America's Grand Master Award. The most recent Grand Master, Marcia Muller, creator of Sharon McCone and a pioneer of the female private-eye novel, is married to Bill Pronzini, who deserves a Grand Master of his own. Below are considered a collection of Millar's shorter work and the latest novels from Muller and Pronzini.

**** Margaret Millar: *The Couple Next Door: Collected Short Mysteries,* edited by Tom Nolan, Crippen & Landru, $29 hardcover, $19 trade paper. Millar was one of the finest practitioners of psychological detective fiction, and a revival of her work is overdue. Two recently rediscovered novellas from the 1940s (entertaining though not outstanding) are joined by four brilliant short stories from the 1950s through 1980s, three of them from *EQMM*. Nolan, who wrote the definitive biography of Ross Macdonald, contributes an excellent 36-page introduction, plus notes to each story.

*** Marcia Muller: *Cape Perdido,* Mysterious, $24.95. In the third entry of the locale-driven series about Soledad County, California, a North Carolina company plans to load water from the depressed former lumbering town of the title into huge blue bags and float it down to Southern California without compensating the residents. A variety of local and outside environmental groups want to derail the plan, whether through legal means or dirty tricks. There's murder, too, with some connection to gradually revealed events of decades before. This is a typically expert Muller product, with a good sense of place, a well-managed large cast, and clues so fair, you'll kick yourself if you don't spot the main crimi-

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nal. (Yes, I'm kicking myself.)

*** Bill Pronzini: *Nightcrawlers,* Forge, $24,95. San Francisco's Nameless detective (called Bill when it's necessary to refer to him in the third person) is now the elder statesman of a three-person private-eye firm, who pursue three separate investigations: serial beatings of gay men in the Castro district, the kidnapping of a child, and the mysterious messages dying pulp writer Russell Dancer passes along to Nameless's mother-in-law. Though more pure suspense than detection, the novel includes some surprising plot twists.

*** Ben Elton: *Past Mortem,* Transworld UK/Trafalgar, $29.99 hardcover, $17 trade paper. Scotland Yard detective Edward Newson, doing his best to submerge his unrevealed love for his beautiful partner, gets in touch with old schoolmates through a Friends Reunited Web site while investigating the crimes of a serial killer who targets bullies, choosing a fresh and appropriate murder method for each one. Whether in comic/satirical or more straight-faced mode, British comedian Elton is one of the most consistently entertaining crime writers going, and this book is totally involving from beginning to end. The one drawback: Many readers will figure out the murderer's identity (by a very broad fair-play clue, not guesswork) long before Elton chooses to reveal it. And if you can't handle explicit kinky sex and graphic descriptions of some sickening torture/murders, consider yourself warned.

*** Michael Jecks: *The Chapel of Bones,* Headline/Trafalgar, $25. In 1323, a series of deaths in Exeter Cathedral Close seem connected to the murder forty years earlier of a cathedral official. Sir Baldwin Furnshill and Bailiff Simon Puttock investigate in a typically highly populated, deviously plotted adventure with the usual accoutrements: a glossary of terms, a list of characters, two maps, and an historical note.

*** Katherine Hall Page: *The Body in the Snowdrift,* Morrow, $23.95. Caterer Faith Fairchild agrees to spend a week at a Vermont ski resort with her minister husband's family in celebration of her father-in-law's seventieth birthday and promptly finds a dead body in the snow. The background is expertly rendered; the characters and their sometimes-tense relationships are believable; the writing has humorous flair; and every loose end is elucidated with commendable tidiness. Page does the malice-domestic-with-recipes number as well as anybody and better than most.

** Gladys Mitchell: *Sleuth's Alchemy: Cases of Mrs. Bradley and Others,* edited by Nicholas Fuller, Crippen & Landru, $29 hardcover, $19 trade paper. The author's status as one of the longest-running (first novel 1929, last 1984) and most quirkily individual writers of the British Golden Age justifies this collection of 31 stories, nearly all new to U.S. print. A

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few feature psychiatric sleuth Beatrice Bradley, who looks nothing like her TV portrayer Diana Rigg. Varied and mildly diverting as these are, short stories were not Mitchell's strong suit. Editor Fuller's substantial introduction is the best feature.

** M.C. Beaton: *Death of a Bore,* Mysterious, $23.95. Hamish Macbeth, village constable in the Scottish highlands, takes an immediate dislike to pretentious novelist John Heppel, a new resident of Lochdubh who signs up the locals for writing classes and frequently wears makeup in the hope that a TV news crew might turn up. When Heppel is murdered, Macbeth is determined to prove no villager was guilty. The plot is okay, and the writing has a low-key charm, but those new to the series may find the falling action (over twenty pages after the obligatory suspense climax) a bit excessive.

Death of a Bore is also available in an unabridged audiobook (Audio Partners, $24.95 cassette; $27.95 CD), nicely read by Graeme Malcolm. From the same publisher is William Dufris's effective reading of *The Thin Man* ($27.95 cassette; $29.95 CD), which is the least of Dashiell Hammett's five major novels but still holds up well, with some surprises for fans of the classic film version.

Meeting Across the River (Bloomsbury, $14.95), edited by Jessica Kaye and Richard Brewer, has a unique theme for an original anthology: twenty stories inspired by the very noirish Bruce Springsteen song of the title. Illustrating the variety of possible approaches are Steve Hamilton's "One Fast Packard," about liquor-smuggling in 1931 Detroit, and Paul Charles's comic "In the Midnight Hour," about an inept young Irish criminal's efforts to get to America. Best stories from my sampling were William Kent Krueger's Minnesota mood piece "The Far Side of the River" and Eddie Muller's New Jersey-based "Last Call," brief but complex with an inventive narrative structure. The stories that diverge farthest from the song—such as those by C.J. Box, Gregg Hurwitz, and Barbara Seranella—tend to be the least successful, but Cara Black's "Mosquito Incense," set in Japan and more mainstream than crime story, may be the exception. Editor Kaye's final entry provides an appropriate coda.

The latest reprint in Otto Penzler's Edgar-winner series is the Best First Novel of 1969, Joe Gores's *A Time of Predators* (Forge, $24.95 hardcover; $14.95 trade paper). The first of Joseph Telushkin's three Rabbi Winter novels, 1987's *The Unorthodox Murder of Rabbi Wahl* (Toby, $9.95), is doubly traditional: in its views on contemporary social issues and in its finely-honed puzzle plot.

The Mammoth Book of Short Spy Novels (Carroll & Graf, $13.95), edited by Bill Pronzini and Martin H. Greenberg, is a reprint of *13 Short Espionage Novels,* including among its stellar cast Doyle, Woolrich, Maugham, Hoch, and Fleming.

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Art by Mark Evans

BLIND ROADS

by Clark Howard

1.

Fred Hedge did not know if the cry he had heard was animal or human.

Fred had a little crossroads country store a few miles down Route 51 outside Lamont, Tennessee. He had just unlocked the store's front door at six A.M. and was standing on the front porch, breathing in the still-cool July 1946 morning air that would turn into a wet cloak of humid heat before noon. Then he heard the cry and squinted down the road where it had come from. Animal or human, it had definitely been a cry of anguish. Fred walked to the edge of the porch and waited to see if it was repeated.

It was. And it was human.

Presently, a young man burst from the wooded area alongside the highway and ran toward the crossroads and Fred's store. He was dressed in farm clothes and yelling something about birds.

"The birds—! Birds—!"

Fred could not make out the rest of it until the running man reached the store and stumbled, panting for breath, up to the porch. Then it became clear.

"The birds got her! My God, it's awful! She's lying out in the

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woods! The birds got her—!"

Fred Hedge realized at once who the frantic man was talking about. A young girl named Abby Craft had been missing for thirteen days. Fred instinctively knew she was missing no longer.

He hurried inside to the telephone.

The dispatcher for the Kennant County Sheriff's Department took the call and hurried into Sheriff Bobby Leonard's office.

"A body's just been found out by Fred Hedge's store."

Bobby Leonard tensed. "Man or woman?"

"Woman."

Bobby's shoulders slumped. "Damn." Rising, buckling on his gunbelt, and reaching for his hat, he said, "Call Dwight Graham."

"Yessir." The dispatcher hurried back to the switchboard and telephoned the office of the Kennant County District Attorney.

Outside, Bobby Leonard's cruiser sped away from the jail.

One year and three months earlier, on Easter Sunday morning, April 1, 1945, two young soldiers, Billy Clyde and Arlen Tobey, of the Ninth Infantry Division, both laden with combat gear, lined up with scores of other men at the rail of a transport ship, preparing to board one of hundreds of landing craft that would take them to a malaria-ridden, snake-infested island a mile away.

"What'd they say the name of this here place was?" Arlen asked.

"Okinawa," Billy replied. He wet his lips. "You scared?"

"Damned straight I am! You?"

"Scareder than hell," Billy admitted. "This sure is a long way from Tennessee."

Somewhere behind them, a sergeant yelled, "All right, let's move out and get in them boats and hit that goddamned beach!"

When Bobby Leonard reached the clearing in the woods where the nervous young farm hand had led him, he came upon an old shack near which a dozen fair-sized buzzards were prancing around, stepping high, hissing as they fidgeted excitedly around their carrion. The buzzards saw the men but did not flee; arrogant and ugly, they glared at the humans with beady eyes under their bald skulls and continued to pick at whatever was on the ground.

Bobby pulled his revolver. The single shot he fired was straight

48 years into his career as a crime writer, Clark Howard is making a debut this month. This is his first private-eye story. Though the author received a nomination for the Private Eye Writers of America's Shamus Award in 2002, it was for a story that was "hardboiled" without actually featuring a P.I. (See "Cobalt Blues" 9-10/01.) His newly minted contribution to the ranks of fictional P.I.'s, Lon Bradford, plies his trade in Tennessee post World War II. ¶

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down into the ground, not at the buzzards, because as despicable as they were, the birds were important to farmers in that rural area: They ate field rats and beetles that plagued crops. But the shot did not have to be *at* them; the one thing buzzards feared was the *sound* of a gunshot, and they only had to hear it once before taking flight with heavy, clamorous wingbeats.

"Stay here," Bobby ordered the farmhand. "Don't move."

He walked into the clearing where the birds had been, and presently was stopped by the sight and stench of what was there.

"God almighty," he whispered to himself. It was both prayer and expletive.

The corpse's long yellow hair was spread out like a fan above empty eye sockets, a forehead and nose pecked to the bone, a head with no ears, no lips, teeth looking hideous in shriveled gums, breasts completely gone, chest stripped to the ribs.

Putting a handkerchief over his nose and mouth, Bobby forced himself to move forward. The body's open stomach was a roiling pool of maggots above hipbones and shins that were skinless, and toes that were now dry bones but still clad in open-toed shoes. Here and there in the bird-clawed dirt, Bobby could see a polished red fingernail, and several tattered strips of cloth, some green, some white.

The words on a Missing Person's bulletin surfaced in Bobby Leonard's mind:

> . . . LAST SEEN WEARING GREEN-AND-WHITE DRESS, OPEN-TOED SHOES, GOLD BRACELET ON ONE WRIST, CARRYING A NEW BOX-STYLE WHITE PURSE . . .

Turning, Bobby walked back to where the farm hand was standing.

It was her. It was Abby Craft.

On Okinawa, seven dreadful weeks after the amphibious landing, Billy Clyde and Arlen Tobey, along with hundreds of other combat infantrymen, sat hollow-eyed and filthy in a putrid swamp at the foot of a hill pocked with dug-in enemy suicide troops. The Americans, who had nicknamed the place Hen Hill because the enemy was entrenched like thousands of hens in a giant coop, were under heavy, unrelenting fire.

"We done charged those goddamned pillboxes nine times!" Arlen cursed. "How many more times they gonna make us do it?"

"I reckon until we take it," Billy answered wearily.

Neither of them looked young anymore; they were bone-tired, half sick, had jungle rot eating at their hands, feet, and ears, and every time they had to charge Hen Hill, they did it like wild-eyed robots of some kind. Nothing else mattered to them anymore: not their homes, not family, not anything—except that goddamned hill. Hen Hill was their whole existence.

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Presently, as they knew it would, a voice came from down the line, shouting, "Let's go! Move out! Let's get this done! Move it, move it, move it!"

District Attorney Dwight Graham was waiting at Hedge's store when Bobby Leonard and the young farm hand returned. From the grave expression on Bobby's twenty-eight-year-old freckled face, Graham knew he did not even have to ask the question. But he did anyway.

"Well?"

"It's her," Bobby said.

"Son of a bitch!" Dwight Graham cursed. He was twelve years older than Bobby, and his eldest daughter had just graduated Lamont High School with Abby Craft. The two girls had grown up together. Graham's face looked like it had turned to dark river rock.

"I want Clayton and Benny Hardin brought back in—right now," he told Bobby. "I'm going to get something out of those two little bastards if I have to beat it out of them!"

"You mean if *I* have to beat it out of them," Bobby amended. He turned to the young farm hand who had discovered the body. It occurred to him that in his haste to find out if the body was Abby Craft's, he had not even bothered to identify the man. "What's your name?" he asked now.

"Uh, Tommy Chisholm, sir."

"What were you doing in the woods, Tommy?"

"Jus' taking a shortcut over here to the store, sir. I work for old Mr. Fitch over on his place. I was jus' coming to get me a Dr Pepper."

Bobby studied him for a moment, then said, "Okay, Tommy, I want you to come into town with me. I'll call Mr. Fitch and explain things." To Dwight Graham, he said, "I'll pick up both Hardin boys, too, Mr. Graham."

Arlen Tobey got it first on Okinawa, the bullet hitting him high in the chest between the left armpit and the collarbone. They were halfway up Hen Hill, crouching to stay under the withering machine-gun fire from above. Suddenly Arlen yelled and pitched backwards, sliding down the incline.

Billy Clyde managed to grab one of his feet to stop him. Arlen was conscious, his eyes wide, gulping in air and dirt and the taste of explosives. Blood spurted up from his wound and covered one side of his face. He began to panic.

"Billy? Billy—!"

"I'm right here, Arlen! Take it easy—"

At that instant, a bullet slammed into Billy's left shoulder from the back and knocked him forward on top of Arlen. His chin strap came loose and his helmet went rolling down the hill.

"Sons of bitches—!" Billy swore. Rolling over, he began randomly

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firing his rifle up the hill. Before he could get off a full clip, he was hit again, this time in the head.

Arlen saw an explosion of blood where Billy's helmet should have been, and then Billy dropped on top of him again and lay limp and still. Arlen began to yell.

"Medic! Medic—!"

Clayton Hardin and his cousin Benny Hardin were not happy about being picked up by Sheriff Bobby Leonard and brought to the jail.

"Goddamn, Sheriff, we done told you this story a dozen times!" Clayton raged. "What in hell is this all about now?" Clayton was the spoiled son of Kennant County's biggest farmer.

"You're going to tell it again," an authoritative voice snapped as District Attorney Dwight Graham entered the room. Clayton calmed down at once in the D.A.'s presence. Clayton's daddy might be the biggest landowner, but Dwight Graham was the head of the Republican Party and, some believed, a Knight of the Ku Klux Klan.

"I'll leave these boys to you, Mr. Graham," Bobby Leonard said. "I want to have a talk with that farm hand I brought in."

As Bobby left the room, Graham sat down and fixed the two Hardin youths with his most severe look.

"Let's go over it again now. Start with the Fourth of July celebration. . . ."

Clayton and Benny had not faltered an iota in their story since the first time they had told it the day after Abby Craft had gone missing.

That story began early in the evening after the Fourth of July picnic that was an annual community event in Lamont, the county seat of Kennant County. Clayton and Benny, who were both twenty, had taken Abby Craft and her friend Nancy Grey for a ride in a 1946 Plymouth convertible that Clayton's daddy had given him for his twentieth birthday. It was one of the first post-World War Two cars made, and the girls were thrilled at the thought of riding in it.

Earlier, Benny Hardin had picked up a Mason jar of bootleg liquor—"White Lightning," it was called—at the local poolroom, Kennant being a dry county. Then the foursome had headed south on Route 51 toward Memphis, fifty miles away. They only got as far as some roadhouses two counties down, and there began a night of drinking, dancing, and smoking Avalons, a new brand of cigarette.

Abby Craft indulged in cigarette-smoking, but could only be coaxed into a couple of sips of the hooch. About eleven o'clock, they started back north toward Lamont, but by that time Clayton was so sloshed that he couldn't drive, so his date, Nancy Grey, had taken the wheel. Halfway home, she ran into a ditch. Abby, who had an inflexible midnight curfew set by her father, was furious with her three friends. She left the car and started walking down the highway. While she was still in sight of the ditched car's head-

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lights, Clayton and Benny claimed to have seen a black pickup truck pull over and give Abby a ride. Nancy Grey, by that time, had passed out and did not see the pickup truck, but both Clayton and Benny were certain that it had Texas license plates on it.

That was the last her friends ever saw of Abby Craft—alive.

In another part of the jail, Bobby Leonard was quietly questioning the young farm hand, Tommy Chisholm.

"Tommy, I know where the Fitch farm is, and I know where Fred Hedge's store is. That's a fair piece to walk just for a Dr Pepper, isn't it?"

Tommy shrugged. "I guess."

"You cut through those woods a lot?"

Another shrug. "I guess."

"You ever been in that old shack out there at the edge of the clearing?"

Tommy looked down at his high-top farm shoes. "Couple times," he muttered.

"What for?"

"Jus' to look around."

"Look around for what?"

"I don't know. Any old thing."

The young sheriff observed that Chisholm was beginning to sweat, even though a ceiling fan kept the room reasonably comfortable.

"Old man Fitch lives out there on his place alone, don't he?"

"Mostly."

"Not all the time?"

"Well, he's got a granddaughter lives down in Memphis. She comes for weekends a lot."

"What's her name?"

"Gloria."

"Gloria Fitch?"

"No, sir, Gloria Dixon. She was married, but ain't no more. She works in a department store down in Memphis."

"Pretty?"

Another shrug from an increasingly nervous Tommy Chisholm. "Yeah. Kind of. I guess."

Bobby fixed the younger man in an unblinking stare. "Tommy, you ever take Gloria out in the woods to that shack?"

Tommy looked down at his shoes again as the back of his neck turned beet red.

After consulting with the district attorney, Bobby Leonard called the Shelby County sheriff in Memphis and requested that he locate Gloria Dixon and hold her as a material witness in a homicide investigation. Bobby sent one of his deputies, with the Lamont librarian as a chaperone, down to bring her back for questioning.

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In the meantime, Dwight Graham reluctantly had to let the Hardin cousins go.

"Damn it, I know one of them had something to do with that girl's killing," he swore. "Probably that little pissant Clayton. I'll bet a dime that he raped her, then got scared and killed her, and dumped her out in those woods. The other two were so drunk they probably didn't even know it was happening."

Around midafternoon, the deputy returned with Gloria Dixon. The first thing that Bobby and Dwight Graham noticed when the shapely, overly made-up twenty-four-year-old was brought in was that she was carrying a new white box-style purse.

While Dwight began interviewing Gloria Dixon, Bobby went into another office and telephoned the Craft home, asking Ralph and Lillian Craft, Abby's parents, if they would please come up to the jail. Neither knew yet that their daughter's body had been found; it still lay out in the woods, under guard, waiting for a team from the state laboratory over in Nashville to arrive.

The Crafts, anxious and nervous, arrived a few minutes later. Ralph owned the town's five-and-dime store, and his wife Lillian was a homemaker active in civic and social clubs. Abby was their only child. Accompanying them to the jail was the Lamont town patriarch, Circuit Judge Sam Norvell, a longtime family friend and Abby's godfather.

When the Crafts were taken into the room where Dwight Graham was interviewing Gloria Dixon, Mrs. Craft took one look at the new white box-style purse Gloria was holding and fainted.

Dwight Graham and Bobby Leonard now focused on the trail of the little purse.

"Where did you get it?" Dwight demanded to know.

"From Tommy Chisholm," Gloria admitted. "But I swear I didn't know it belonged to that poor girl."

Bobby brought Chisholm into the room. Dwight went on the attack.

"You killed that girl and stole her purse, didn't you?"

"I didn't! Swear to God, I didn't do nothin' of the sort!"

"Where'd you get it, then?"

"Found it in that little shack out there jus' a couple days after she went missing. It looked like it was brand-new, so I give it to Gloria when me and a friend went down to Memphis to see her the next weekend."

"Where were you the night of the Fourth of July?"

"Me and this same friend had gone down to Memphis to see Gloria then, too. Swear to God, sir."

"Who's your friend?" Bobby Leonard asked.

"Herman Holt. Ol' boy drives a backhoe for that pipe company up in Dyer County."

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Dwight looked hard at Gloria Dixon. "He telling the truth?"

"Yessir," she swore. "Him and Herman bought a bottle and come down that evening. We sat out in Confederate Park and drank and watched the fireworks."

"How long?"

Gloria shrugged. "I reckon it was 'bout eleven when they dropped me off at my boardinghouse and headed back for home."

"Where'd you go after you took her home?" Dwight asked Chisholm.

"Herman took me back to the Fitch place and then he went on home, I guess."

"You live at the Fitch place?"

"Yessir. Got me a nice corner fixed up in the shed. Mr. Fitch's cook fixes my meals."

"Which road did you take to get back there?"

"Why, Route Fifty-one," Tommy said.

Dwight and Bobby Leonard exchanged glances. Route 51 was where Clayton Hardin's car ran into the ditch.

"What does this Holt boy drive?"

"Old 'thirty-nine Ford pickup."

"What color?"

"Black."

Dwight nodded to Bobby Leonard and the young sheriff left to drive the twenty miles up to Dyer County to get Herman Holt.

Back in February, 1946, at the U.S. Army Convalescent Hospital in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Corporal Billy Clyde, in a hospital robe, had sat in front of the desk of Major Leon Gordon, a neurosurgeon in the Army Medical Corps. Dr. Gordon had been treating Billy since he had been shipped home following the Okinawa campaign.

"Billy," the doctor said, "I'm going to approve a medical discharge for you and recommend an eighty-percent disability pension for your head wound. I wish I could tell you that the headaches you have will get better, but I can't. You're going to have to live with them, and with occasional blackouts, too. I'm sorry. I wish the prognosis was better. Do you have any plans for the future?"

Billy shrugged. "Go on back to Tennessee, I reckon, sir. My mama's got a house in Memphis; I can live with her. Try to find some kind of work."

"Look for something outdoors, Billy," the doctor advised. "Something where you won't be cooped up. And above all, something where you won't be under any stress. It's very important that you not be under any stress."

Billy nodded. "Yessir. No stress." He grinned wryly. "Maybe I can find a job taking care of a cemetery."

Herman Holt was a rail-thin, rangy man of twenty-five, with shifty

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eyes. He proved to be of no more help to Dwight Graham than his friend Tommy Chisholm had been. Their stories, in fact, were identical. Herman Holt even admitted to also occasionally using the little shack in the woods as a trysting place with a waitress or two.

Bobby sent two deputies up to Dyer County to bring Holt's pickup truck back. To the disappointment of the Kennant County lawmen, the old Ford carried Tennessee tags, and a thorough search produced no signs of blood, hair, or any other visible evidence that Abby Craft might have been in it.

"These two jokers did it," Dwight Graham now proclaimed privately to Bobby Leonard, dismissing his earlier conclusion about Clayton Hardin. "I know they did it. I can feel it in my gut."

He and Bobby went to Judge Norvell's house to confer with the jurist.

Sam Norvell was a smallish, spunky man who had served the law in one way or another—policeman, prosecutor, judge—for fifty years.

"Well, it's not the strongest case I've ever seen," he ruled when told about Chisholm and Holt. "All circumstantial. But the Chisholm boy did have Abby's purse; the Holt fellow drove a black pickup; the Hardin boys, who had been drinking, *could* be mistaken about the Texas plates; and both Chisholm and Holt have admitted to using that little shack in the woods for illicit purposes. Might hold water. You'll have to get it past a grand jury for an indictment or there's no way you can bring it to trial."

Dwight Graham had Bobby Leonard arrest both Chisholm and Holt, and immediately convened a grand jury selected from the voter registration lists of Kennant County. One morning two weeks later, he presented the circumstantial evidence that he had compiled against the two men.

That afternoon, Dwight and the young sheriff waited anxiously while the grand jury considered the case. It took only two hours before the district attorney and the sheriff were summoned to hear their decision.

They had voted not to indict.

Tommy Chisholm and Herman Holt went free.

2.

A year after Abby Craft's murder, Judge Sam Norvell drove down to Memphis to see Lon Bradford, a former Kennant County sheriff who had moved to the city and gone into business as a private detective. The elderly judge and "Brad," as the younger man was known, were longtime friends.

"Brad," the judge said, "I'm here in the interest of Ralph and Lillian Craft. Those poor people are on the cusp of a mental and emotional breakdown. The grief and sadness they feel at losing Abby might even do more than cause a breakdown; it might just kill

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them. I think they could get over the loss itself, but the fact that their only child was savagely murdered and left out in the woods for the buzzards, and that whoever killed her is still unpunished, might just be too much for them to bear." The elderly man drummed wrinkled fingers on Bradford's desk. "Brad, I want you to investigate Abby's murder for me."

Bradford leaned back in a squeaky swivel chair. "Seems to me it's already been pretty thoroughly investigated, Judge. Dwight Graham and Bobby Leonard dug up enough to take it to a grand jury."

"Without getting an indictment," the judge reminded him. "The Crafts think those two boys, Chisholm and Holt, are guilty. So do a lot of other folks. Unfortunately, we didn't get those folks on the grand jury. I want you to see if you can come up with more evidence."

Bradford was hesitant. A tall, lanky, easygoing Southerner, he shook his head. "That's a real long shot, Judge. Anyway, you know that kind of stuff's not really my line anymore. I handle mostly insurance-fraud cases, a little divorce work, some dishonest-employee surveillance—that kind of thing. I really think murder ought to be left up to the professional lawmen."

"I agree—as long as they get results," Judge Norvell said. "But in this case, they haven't. Now look, son, you know and I know that you were probably the best criminal investigator in the state, probably still are—and I don't care what kind of cases you're handling now. I want you to do this for me as a personal favor, son."

Brad knew that when the old judge started calling him "son," he was hooked. It was Norvell's way of taking it out of being strictly business and making it personal. And nobody ever turned down the judge; he had done too many favors for too many people over the years: Everybody owed him.

"What if I prove that those two boys really *didn't* do it?" the detective asked. "How's everybody going to feel about that?"

"No worse than they feel right now," Norvell said. "Will you do it for me, son?"

"All right," Brad grudgingly agreed. "I'll look into it. But don't expect any miracles. Insurance fraud is mostly what I do now, you know."

"I know, I know," the old judge said. "I heard you the first time, son."

Bradford went up to Lamont to see his friend, Doc Caldwell, the Kennant County coroner.

"Was the Craft girl raped?" he asked.

The coroner shrugged. "No way to tell, Brad. Not enough left of her down there. Buzzards like to go after the soft parts."

"So all we know is the cause of death?"

"Yep. Blunt instrument to the skull. What happened to her before that is anybody's guess."

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Brad's next stop was to see Dwight Graham and Bobby Leonard. Longtime acquaintances, neither man resented Bradford's entry into the case. And Judge Norvell had already spoken to them, paving the way.

"I hope to God you find something, Brad," the district attorney asserted. "I think those two boys are guilty as hell; I just couldn't convince the grand jury of it."

Brad asked for a rundown on the crime and its scene.

"I think she was slugged in that little shack," Bobby Leonard said. "Either during or after a rape. Looked to me like she was hit with a billy club or a tire iron, something like that. She was left there; maybe whoever hit her thought she was dead—but she wasn't. There was crawl marks—hands and knees—from the shack to where we found her. She was probably trying to get to the road. But she only made it about fifty feet before she died."

"If she'd stayed in the shack," Dwight said with a sigh, "we'd have found her lots sooner; that place was checked the very first day of the search. But somehow she was missed lying over there in the brush. Until the birds found her."

Bradford, like Graham and Leonard, like nearly everyone else in the community, was convinced that the murder had resulted from a sexual assault. There was no other reason for anyone to kill a pretty, respectable young girl like Abby Craft. And the two suspects, Tommy Chisholm and Herman Holt, were perfect candidates for the crime: both rough, earthy, tobacco-chewing, whiskey-drinking laborers. But why then, Bradford wondered, hadn't a grand jury indicted them?

No transcripts were kept of grand jury proceedings in Tennessee; they were almost like the Star Chamber hearings of sixteenth-century England. So there was no way for Bradford to study the testimony, to find the weak link in Dwight Graham's case. And he could not ask Dwight, because a prosecutor was forbidden by law from discussing what went on in a grand jury room. The names of *members* of a grand jury panel, however, were a matter of public record. And Bradford had been around the county long enough that the chances were pretty good that he either personally knew some member of the panel, or knew someone who did.

That someone, when he checked the list of names, turned out to be Homer Osborn. Homer and Brad had played softball together years earlier.

"Well, lookit here," Homer said when his old teammate walked up to the porch of his house, "if it ain't the private dick hisself."

"Howdy, Homer," Brad said with a smile. "You ever learn to catch yet?"

"Outcatch you any day of the week and twice on Sundays," Homer replied. He hollered for his wife to bring another glass of lemonade for his guest. After some preliminary good-natured jaw-

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ing, Brad got down to business.

"Listen, ol' buddy, strictly off the record, just between two worn-out old ballplayers, why didn't Tommy Chisholm and Herman Holt get indicted?"

"It was that license plate," Homer told him confidentially. "Both the Hardin boys swore that the black pickup that carried the Craft girl off had a Texas tag on it. Herman Holt's pickup had Tennessee plates."

"Maybe they switched plates to keep from being identified when they were prowling around," Brad suggested.

Homer shook his head. "Them ol' boys ain't that smart, Brad. You talk to 'em, you'll see."

Later, Bradford did talk to both Tommy Chisholm and Herman Holt. The two former suspects were bitter, especially Chisholm.

"I'd've been better off just leaving her out there in the woods and not telling nobody about her," Tommy said, "what with all the grief it's brung me for finding her."

Both men were nevertheless cooperative and answered all of Brad's questions. When Brad finished talking to them, he was inclined to agree with Homer Osborn: Chisholm and Holt simply were not bright enough or clever enough to switch license plates for criminal purposes.

Bradford was left with two likely conclusions: The attack on Abby Craft had been sexual, probably unplanned, spontaneous; and there *was* a black pickup truck from Texas.

Billy Clyde had come back home to Memphis with a medical discharge, a Purple Heart, and his eighty-percent disability pension. The disability was primarily because of the raging headaches and occasional blackouts that still ravaged him as a result of his head wound. He moved back in with his twice-widowed mother, Carrie Allgood.

Billy did not have to be in any particular hurry to get a job; the disability pension was enough to live on as long as all he had to do was pay his mother room and board. But he was not an idler by nature and wanted something to do to keep busy. He was reluctant to take a regular job around other workers, because the headaches seized him like epileptic convulsions, and it was embarrassing. But a friend of his in the neighborhood knew of a job that might be perfect for the young veteran.

"Last summer," the friend said, "I was a driver for this blind peddler named Roy Barbee, from Marshall, Texas. He sells brooms and brushes and things like that to farm women out on the rural routes. I had to quit when summer was over to go back to school again. But Roy's always looking for a good driver; he has trouble keeping anybody 'cause it's just driving up and down country roads all day, which can get pretty boring."

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"I wouldn't mind the boredom," Billy had said, "long as we were keeping on the move."

It was the sitting around his mother's house all day that was getting to him. Plus, he thought, Roy Barbee, being handicapped himself, would understand when Billy had to take a few minutes to fight off the burning in his head that sometimes got so bad that it caused him to groan aloud in agony.

Roy Barbee, it turned out, was delighted to have Billy's friend contact him and recommend the recently discharged veteran.

That spring, Billy Clyde started driving for Roy Barbee.

In Barbee's black pickup truck with Texas license plates on it.

Lon Bradford talked over his progress with Judge Norvell.

"Doesn't look to me like Chisholm and Holt did it, Judge. Looks like maybe a stranger in a Texas truck."

Norvell shook his head. "Abby's mother is convinced that she wouldn't have gotten into a truck with somebody she didn't know."

"Well, maybe Abby's mother didn't know her daughter as well as she *thought* she did. I learned that Abby smoked cigarettes and took an occasional sip of White Lightning. I'm sure her mother didn't know *that.*"

"You've got a point," the older man admitted. He sighed the kind of soft sigh that only a man in his seventies, who had seen it all at one time or another, can sigh. "All right, where do we go from here?"

Brad shrugged. "I suppose I could try looking for the truck—but, my lord, Judge, the chances of finding it are pretty slim—"

"But not hopeless," the judge declared. "Not for somebody smart and determined." He paused for effect. "Not for somebody like you, son."

Son, again.

Shit, Bradford thought.

Back in his office in Memphis, Brad opened a bottle of factory liquor, propped his feet up on the window sill behind his desk, and contemplated the task before him.

What, first of all, would a Texas truck be doing in Kennant County in July? Couldn't have been somebody just passing through; they wouldn't have known about the little trysting shack. So it pretty much had to be somebody familiar with the area—yet from out of state. Unless, of course, it was a stranger and Abby herself had led him to the shack. . . .

Brad took a drink of the whiskey and shook that thought out of his mind. No way could he propose a theory like that to the judge.

What about a migrant worker? Kennant County had its share of them, but no—not as early as July, when the cotton wasn't ready and the tomatoes had been picked two months earlier.

A peddler of some kind? Since the war ended, there had been an

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influx of peddlers in the South, traveling from town to town, farm to farm, door to door, selling everything from arthritis salve to zippers. A peddler got around an area a lot before moving on; one might have seen the shack and remembered it—or even been led there by a local girl.

Taking another pull from the bottle, Bradford thought about how to look for the truck. He knew he couldn't just start wandering around the state asking questions. He was a stranger and would immediately have aroused suspicion. A direct approach wouldn't get him the time of day. He would have to go undercover, he thought. A wry smile spread across his face.

Just like in the picture shows.

In Memphis there was a wholesale jobber of variety merchandise named Newton Thorn. Newton and Brad had their offices in the same building. Brad took Newton into his confidence and asked for his help.

"I want to become a part-time peddler for a few months, Newt," the detective said. "I want to travel Highway Fifty-one from Memphis up to, say, Union City, and then back down Route Forty-five to Jackson. I want to stop at every filling station, grocery store, cafe, roadhouse, what have you. I want to look authentic and I don't want anything about me to arouse suspicion. Got any suggestions?"

Newton Thorn helped Bradford make the transition from city detective to itinerant peddler. On consignment, he gave Brad a selection of novelty merchandise that could be peddled at almost any small business: little mechanical wind-up figures, key chains, penlights, punchboards, miniature telescopes with a pinup girl inside, playing cards, movie star pin-back buttons, two-headed nickels, and various other items that could be displayed next to a cash register to prompt impulse buying.

Newt also gave Brad some personal tips.

"Always buy something in every business you go into, whether you want it or not; buy a bottle of soda, a pack of smokes, a chunk of cheese—anything. And don't ever be in a hurry; stand and talk about the weather, the bean crops, hog prices. Don't even open your sample case until you've been in the place a few minutes. And never try to high-pressure small country proprietors: It can't be done."

Bradford scoured a few wrecking yards until he found a junk car with old Texas plates on it. He put them on a used pickup truck that Judge Norvell got out of the impound lot. Then he dug out some of his older clothes to wear, and hit the road.

All along Highway 51 north, at every little business he came to, Brad told the same story. "I'm kind of new to this part of the country. Come from Texas, actually. My sister, she talked me into coming up here to work. This boy of hers, my nephew, took off about a year ago and she ain't heard from him since. Some relative told my sister he

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was over here in Tennessee doing migrant work or something. So my sister wanted me to try and find him. He's got an old black pickup with Texas plates. Seen a young feller like that, by any chance?"

Everywhere Bradford went, he got the same answer: *Can't say I have.*

Throughout August and well into September, Brad kept to the road, driving one of the north-south highways a day or two each week, then returning to Memphis to keep his small detective agency running. To his surprise, he earned a fair amount of money peddling Newt Thorn's variety goods. But he never developed any information. And as the cotton was all picked and fall came on, he decided to call it quits.

"It's not getting us anywhere, Judge," he told Norvell. "Let's let it rest for a while. Maybe in the spring we'll try again."

Billy Clyde found driving for Roy Barbee perfectly to his liking. The blind peddler, a man in his mid fifties, was interesting to listen to, with an endless retinue of road stories to tell, and he was easygoing and completely understanding about Billy's condition.

Whenever Billy felt a killer headache beginning, he would simply pull onto the side of the road, swallow half a dozen aspirin, and they would wait for it to pass.

Sometimes the pain of Billy's headaches was so intense that it almost neutralized his equilibrium. Once, when he was pacing around next to the parked truck, he stumbled and inadvertently grabbed a barbed-wire fence with both hands to regain his balance. Back in the truck, he got a clean pair of socks out of his bag to wrap around his hands until the bleeding stopped.

Roy Barbee had a pretty simple work procedure. Carrying his stock of brooms, brushes, and other items under a tarp in the bed of the pickup, he would have Billy drive him from farmhouse to farmhouse along every country road around every town they came to. Barbee was not totally blind; he could see well enough to make his way from the truck to the farmhouse door with his samples, but he carried his red-tipped white cane nevertheless—tap-tap-tapping on the porch steps—because he knew that nothing helped make a sale like a little pity. And he seldom failed to sell something, even if it was just a ten-cent dustpan.

When supplies in the back of the truck began to dwindle, Barbee wired an order to his supplier in Chicago, and a new shipment would be waiting at the Railway Express office a few towns down the road.

In the spring after he returned from the war, Billy drove Barbee all over northern Mississippi, then up into west Tennessee. He was eating well, and liked his job. But those raging headaches were still with him.

Along with the frightening periods of blackout.

Once they were in Tennessee, Roy Barbee had Billy drive on a

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zigzag route back and forth between the two main north-south highways, Routes 51 and 45. They worked their way to Somerville, Bolivar, Bethel Springs, then cut up to Henderson, Denmark, Mercer, Hatchie, Dancy—

Dancy.

During the winter months, Lon Bradford kept telling himself that he was finished with the Abby Craft case, that it was a waste of time to pursue the matter any further. Being a practical man, he concluded that he could drive the highways and byways of west Tennessee until he was old and gray and never—*ever*—uncover a single lead on the pickup truck that the murdered girl got into on the last night of her life. Not only was it futile and pointless to continue, but it held out a false hope for the dead girl's parents that Brad felt would never be fulfilled—and to him that was cruel. He determined to convince Judge Sam Norvell that the matter should be dropped.

But as spring came, and the prospect of confronting the old judge with his decision drew nearer, Bradford's resolve began to diminish—especially when a new possibility occurred to him: Now that nearly two years had passed, the killer might feel safe enough to come *back* to Tennessee. It was not at all unusual for a criminal, especially a murderer, to return to the scene of his crime, even to ask questions about it openly, as if only a curious outsider. Bradford could not help being intrigued by the prospect of something like that happening.

So, when April turned unseasonably warm, the Memphis private detective took to the road again a couple of days a week. Using the same cover, he retraced his route of the previous year, hoping to encounter people he might have missed the first time around—and hoping against hope that he might even run across the actual truck and whoever its driver might be.

One of the places he came to again, about four weeks after he had resumed his undercover search, was the little hamlet of Dancy, Tennessee.

The little roadside tavern in Dancy had a Confederate flag behind the bar and a picture of Robert E. Lee next to the cash register. The bartender was a heavyset man who kept moving a stick match from one side of his mouth to the other.

"Naw, I don't recollect no young feller from Texas," he replied after Brad had given him the stock story. "How long's your nephew been gone?"

"Close to two years now," Brad said. "It ain't me so much as it is my sister; she's worried sick about him."

The bartender grunted. "Kids these days ain't got no consideration a'tall for their folks. Ask me, it's the war done it. Sorry I can't he'p you."

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That was when the barmaid came up and set her drink tray down. "I remember somebody like that," she said, "summer before last, I believe it was. Kind of a square-jawed feller, had real thick hair that he combed straight back. Drove a black pickup with Texas tags. Could that've been your boy?"

"Sure sounds like him," Bradford said, feeling a ripple of excitement go up his spine. "How long was he around?"

"Not long. A week, I reckon. He was a traveling salesman of some kind."

"You 'member where he stayed while he was around here?"

"I don't think he stayed in Dancy," the barmaid said. "I think he was staying over somewhere around Hatchie, near the wildlife preserve. I know he mentioned drinking in a roadhouse over there called the Wildlife Club."

"Are you sure he drove a black pickup with Texas license plates?"

"Positive. I seen him drive up in it two or three times."

Abandoning the rest of his planned route, Bradford drove to Hatchie and found the roadhouse the barmaid had told him about. Still using the "wayward nephew" story, he talked to the owner of the club.

"Yeah, I recollect a kid like that," the man said at once. "He was driving a truck for a blind broom peddler. They was in these parts for a week, I reckon, staying at one of the motor courts out on the highway, peddling to all of the farm women near'bouts. Nice kid. Quiet. I 'member him 'cause he used to buy them little tins of aspirin and eat 'em like candy. Said they was for backaches he got from driving."

Bradford spent the next day visiting farmhouses along the back country roads around Hatchie. At almost every one he found a housewife who recalled buying a broom or other item from a blind peddler. Several of them showed Brad the product they had purchased. They appeared to be good-quality brooms and brushes—but none of them had a trademark or other identifying sign. Still, it was the most substantial lead yet developed—and on the basis of it, Bradford telephoned Judge Norvell with the news.

"I think we may have hit a jackpot, Judge."

Back in Memphis, Bradford continued the investigation from his office. Securing from the public library a list of all the manufacturing associations in the eastern United States, he began calling each one of them. When he finally contacted one that included broom manufacturers, he obtained a list of all companies that made brooms for wholesalers and jobbers. Pressing his inquiries in that direction, he asked for the names of all jobbers who worked out of Texas, but might have merchandise shipped to Tennessee, and especially anyone who might have been known to be blind.

Only one name fit Bradford's specifications: a man named Roy Barbee, who worked out of Marshall, Texas, frequently had orders

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Railway Expressed to him at small towns in Tennessee and Mississippi, and always ordered by telegraph, never by letter, because he was blind.

Bradford now made his first trip outside Tennessee in the hunt for Abby Craft's killer. With no Barbees listed in the Marshall telephone directory, and all other long-distance telephone inquiries unproductive, the detective finally drove to the Texas town to personally look for Roy Barbee.

Once there, after a trip of some four hundred miles and a full day walking all over town asking about Barbee, Bradford learned that the blind peddler had retired and settled down in a little town that he had been quite taken with on several sales trips there: Strayhorn, Mississippi—less than forty miles across the Mississippi line from Memphis.

A disgruntled Bradford began the long drive back.

When Bradford finally sat down with Roy Barbee, the blind man was completely cooperative. The young man who had been driving for him during July 1946 was an army veteran named Billy Clyde. And yes, he might have been using the black pickup truck with Texas plates on the night of July Fourth.

"I always let my driver use the truck after the day's work was done. Might's well; truck wasn't no use to me."

But Roy Barbee was vehement in his belief that Billy Clyde could not have been involved in Abby Craft's murder.

"That boy just wasn't like that," he declared. "Not like that at all. Why, he was one of the nicest young men I ever met."

Barbee told Bradford about Billy's headaches and periodic blackouts from his head wound on Okinawa, and also provided Brad with two other leads: The truck had been sold to a farmer over in Arkansas when Barbee decided to retire; and Billy Clyde once had a girlfriend named Susie something, who worked at, and lived over, a drive-in restaurant somewhere.

With the serial number of the truck obtained from Roy Barbee's old registration papers, Brad wired an inquiry to the Motor Vehicle Department in Little Rock. While waiting for a reply to be sent from there, he began looking for "Susie something."

On a hunch, he started with the drive-ins within five miles of Lamont—and to his amazement, found the girl, Susie Manus, at the first one he checked: Fulton's Drive-In, one mile from where Clayton Hardin's car had run into the ditch.

"Yeah, I know Billy," Susie told him. "We dated whenever he was in the area. Matter of fact, we was together the Fourth of July night when Abby Craft disappeared. Has he got something to do with that?"

"Why don't you just tell me about that night," Brad prompted.

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Susie shrugged. "Sure. He picked me up when I got done with work and we drove down to Reelfoot Lake for supper. Ate at Dink's—you know the place, all the catfish you can eat for a dollar. We had a few brews and parked by the lake and, uh—you know, messed around for a while. Then Billy drove me back to my room over the drive-in."

"What was he driving?"

"An old pickup that belonged to the man he worked for."

"What color?"

"Black, I think. Something dark."

"You remember what kind of license tags it had on it?"

"Not really. I never pay much attention to stuff like that."

Bradford studied the young woman. Not too bright, but not a liar, either, he decided.

"Do you remember hearing that Abby Craft disappeared after having been given a ride in a black pickup truck?"

She shrugged again. "Sure."

"Didn't it occur to you that it might have been Billy driving that truck? That he might have been the one who killed Abby Craft?"

Susie Manus became sullen. "Look, mister, I didn't want to get involved in nothing, okay? My reputation around here ain't all that good to begin with. 'Course, if I'd known he was gonna run out on me like he did, maybe I'd've said something. Then it got to be too late—"

Through Susie Manus, Bradford learned a little more about Billy Clyde's excruciating headaches, resulting from a war wound. Brad fired off an inquiry wire to the Veteran's Administration.

The reply told him that Billy Clyde was currently residing in Claypool, Texas, where he was receiving an eighty-percent disability pension.

Brad and Judge Norvell took their information to Dwight Graham and Sheriff Bobby Leonard.

"If Brad can get this Clyde boy to confess and waive extradition," Norvell said, "I'd like to have a Tennessee law officer there to make the arrest and bring him back immediately."

Impressed with the circumstantial evidence Brad had compiled, District Attorney Graham agreed to assign Bobby Leonard to check out a county car and drive Brad to Claypool, Texas.

The four men felt good all around. It looked as if they had just solved the Abby Craft murder.

Just as Roy Barbee had come to like Strayhorn, Mississippi, and had gone there to retire, so had Billy Clyde been attracted to Texas. On the several trips he made with Barbee to the blind man's home in Marshall, Texas, Billy had found the West Texas panhandle country entirely to his liking. Friendly, easygoing people in little towns with colorful names like Friendship, Earth, Progress, and Hub seemed to

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offer him a tranquility that he had found noplace else.

Remarkably—whether actually or only psychologically—his headaches seemed to bother him less when, after Roy Barbee retired, Billy was driving around the little towns in an old used car he bought, doing odd jobs here and there to supplement his disability pension.

In the hamlet of Muleshoe, while working at a local feed store, Billy met a pretty town girl named Ginny Lee Crowder. She was a pert, sassy little church-going girl who seemed just the right balance for the quiet, low-key Billy Clyde. They began dating, and a short while later they were married. In time, a daughter, Betty Sue, came along.

With a family now, Billy decided to settle down. Nothing particularly promising in the way of permanent employment was available in Muleshoe, but Billy heard of a good job just thirty miles away, in Claypool, Texas. The community was looking for a reliable caretaker for its town cemetery. It made Billy recall the remark he had made to Dr. Gordon at the Army Convalescent Hospital when the doctor had emphasized that Billy needed to find stress-free work. Billy had said wryly, "Maybe I can find a job taking care of a cemetery."

Now, just such a job had become available, and to Billy it sounded like the perfect opportunity: quiet, peaceful outdoor work where his headaches might diminish even more. He applied for the job and got it. He and his little family moved to Claypool. There they made a serene, unhurried life for themselves.

But all that ended one day when, while digging a grave at his new job, Billy Clyde looked up to see three men walking across the cemetery toward him. One of them he knew: LeRoy Proctor, the Claypool chief of police. Another man was wearing a Tennessee sheriff's uniform. The third man had on a business suit.

In the Claypool jail, Lon Bradford used every technique he had ever learned to get a confession from Billy Clyde, but all Billy did was shake his head adamantly and say, "I didn't kill that girl. You done tracked down the wrong man, mister."

"You had the black pickup with the Texas plates that night, didn't you? You took Susie Manus out on a date in it. You took her down to Reelfoot Lake for catfish."

"That ain't so. I was with another girl that night. We spent the night at the Cozy Cabins Motel."

"Susie says you were with her. She says you brought her home a little after midnight."

"She's wrong about the night. Or else she's lying," Billy said with a grunt. "She'd do anything to get even with me for running out on her. She was trying to get me to marry her. Hell, one of the reasons I left Tennessee was to get away from her."

Bradford asked for the name of the girl Billy had taken to the motel; Billy could only recall her first name—Eunice—and

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claimed to know virtually nothing else about her; he had met her for the first time earlier that night at a roadhouse.

Bradford did not believe Billy's story. He kept up a quiet, methodical interrogation, trying to find a kink in it—and he came across in a very friendly manner.

"Try to look at it from our point of view, Billy. You were in the area that night. You were driving a black pickup truck. That truck had Texas license plates on it. Two witnesses saw Abby Craft get into a truck just like that. What do you expect us to think?"

"I don't know," Billy said. His head began to throb. "Who's paying you anyway, mister? You ain't no regular lawman."

"Never mind that," Bradford replied. "Your problem right now is accounting for your time the night Abby Craft disappeared."

"I already tol' you where I was!" Billy's head pain increased and he began to move his fingers in an agitated manner.

"Who else could have been driving Roy Barbee's pickup that night besides you?" Bradford pressed.

Billy frowned as serious worry began to spread in his mind. "Nobody, I reckon—" Leaning forward in the chair, he massaged his head with both hands.

Bradford sat very close, facing Billy, and put his hands on the young man's knees. "How bad do those headaches of yours get, Billy?" he asked quietly.

"Bad as they *can* get, I guess."

"You ever black out?"

"Once in a while."

"Ever forget someplace you've been? Something you've done?"

"Yeah, that happens, but—" Confused, disturbed, he shook his head almost in anguish.

"You think you *could* have done it?"

Billy Clyde stared at the private detective. What was happening did not seem real to him.

"Do you, son?" Bradford gently probed.

"I—I reckon."

Bradford stood up. "You come on back to Tennessee with me and let's see if we can straighten this thing out. I guarantee you'll get fair treatment; I'll see to it myself. I'll see that you get the best doctors to back you up. We'll tell all about your war wound, the headaches, the blackouts. How about it?"

Billy nodded helplessly.

Bradford went into another room where Sheriff Bobby Leonard waited with Claypool sheriff LeRoy Proctor.

"Okay," Bradford said. "He's not sure whether he did it or not, but he's agreed to come back to Memphis with us. Let's get him on the road."

Within two hours, after a shocking explanation to Ginny Lee, and the continued assurance of Lon Bradford that everything

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would be straightened out, Brad and Bobby Leonard had Billy Clyde on his way out of Texas.

Back in Kennant County, the first thing District Attorney Dwight Graham did was have Billy Clyde jailed and begin processing papers to charge him with first-degree murder.

"Wait a minute now, Dwight," Bradford objected. "He didn't exactly confess; he admitted he *might* have done it—"

"All right," Dwight countered, "we'll let a jury decide for him."

"But the boy might be sick," Brad protested. "He's got a bad head wound from the war, he has blackouts—hell, he's on eighty-percent disability. This might not be murder at all, it might be involuntary manslaughter or diminished capacity. We need to get some doctors involved in this—"

"Look, Brad, I don't need any doctors for this case; I've got *evidence.* We got the black pickup truck that blind peddler sold to some farmer over in Arkansas. Ultraviolet light shows some traces of blood on the floorboard and seat—"

"That's probably his own blood, not Abby Craft's," Brad declared. "On the way back here, he told me about grabbing onto a barbed-wire fence one time when he felt like his head was going to explode—"

"Brad, I appreciate all the help you've given me on this case," Dwight said, somewhat firmly, "but this is my baby from now on. The people in this community want justice done for Abby Craft—and I'm going to see that they get it. Period."

Brad went to Judge Norvell. "Judge, I promised this boy he'd get a fair shake," he complained to the older man.

"He will," said the judge. "He'll get a fair trial before a jury of his peers."

"His *peers!* Why, everybody in the county is going to want to see him convicted. Look, I told him on the way back here that we'd get him some doctors and help him form some kind of defense—"

"He'll *have* a defense," the judge appeased. "The attorney general in Nashville will send a state public defender down to represent him."

"But that'll be somebody who doesn't know a damn thing about the case, Judge! Dwight Graham will be able to railroad this boy!"

"Dwight is not going to 'railroad' anybody!" the judge snapped. "He's going to present evidence to a jury and let that jury decide! And I will sentence him according to the jury's recommendation." The old judge took a deep breath, and his voice lost its sudden sharpness. "Look, son, you did a hell of a job catching this boy. Now, why don't you just let the wheels of justice roll. They usually go in the right direction."

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Brad could only stare incredulously at the old man.

Dwight Graham was confident that he finally had a case against someone for Abby Craft's brutal murder. The defendant had occasional blackouts; there were traces of blood in the black pickup truck; there was Billy Clyde's admission to Brad that he *might* have done it; and there was the possibility that even if Billy *had* been in the Cozy Cabins Motel with another girl that night, he could have slipped out while she was sleeping—perhaps to buy liquor—and happened by the ditched Hardin car just in time to pick up Abby Craft.

On the defense side, the girl named Eunice, that Billy claimed to have been with, could not be located anywhere in Kennant County. As for the theory that Abby's own mother vehemently denounced, that Abby would have accepted a ride from a stranger, Graham had an answer for that also: Billy had previously driven Roy Barbee around the Lamont area on one of their routes, and it was "possible" that Abby had briefly met the young veteran at some time and knew him slightly.

Another theory, that Billy had actually stopped to give Abby a ride, but that she declined when she did not recognize him, and that one of the Hardin cousins then raped and killed her, would not be allowed by the court, because there was no evidence at all to support it.

The only medical evidence of Billy's head wound were records obtained from the Army Medical Corps, and those were mostly unintelligible to anyone without a degree in medicine.

Dwight Graham was going to strongly urge the jury to send Billy Clyde to the electric chair.

The boy was going to be convicted, Brad was certain of it.

And he felt like hell about his part in the whole thing.

Lon Bradford was right.

Billy Clyde was found guilty of first-degree murder.

But a single juror, one lone holdout, hedged just short of the sentence that Dwight Graham so desperately wanted—and without a unanimous vote, no death penalty could be recommended.

Billy was sentenced to life in prison, just four weeks after he had been charged with murder. Justice had moved very fast in Tennessee on this one.

Exactly two years after Abby Craft's murder, Billy Clyde said goodbye to his mother, wife, and little daughter, and was driven in shackles forty miles north to Platt Penitentiary.

On the way up, Billy wondered why God hadn't just let that second enemy bullet kill him that day on Okinawa.

It would, he felt, have been better for everybody.

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3.

Ginny Lee Clyde never doubted for a moment her husband's innocence, and she swore to stick by him, even after he had been convicted and sentenced. Billy tried to dissuade her.

"Honey, I'm not ever coming out of Platt alive," he told her before they took him north. "I want you to divorce me and find somebody else to make a life for you and Betty Sue with. Forget about me, just like I was dead."

Ginny would have none of it. The young West Texas woman scowled at her husband and said, "Billy Clyde, if you ever say anything like that to me again, I'm going to slap your face! I am your wife, and Betty Sue is your daughter, and you are *not* dead! I intend to wait for you just as long as it takes to get you out of prison. And if you do die in Platt, I'll be waiting outside the gate to claim your body. Whatever the future holds for us, we are going to face it together. We are a family! Do you understand me?"

Billy could only shake his head in frustration. It tore at his heart that the lives of his wife and little daughter had been ruined because of him.

Billy's mother, Mrs. Carrie Allgood, also stood by him like a rock. "My boy," she said grimly, "did not kill that girl, and anyone who says he did is a liar and will have to answer to Jesus for it someday. And that includes Mr. Dwight Graham!"

To Billy she promised, "I won't draw a peaceful breath until we get you out, son. We'll prove your innocence no matter what it takes."

Carrie, a handsome woman twice widowed, was being courted at the time by Lewis Spencer, a man she had met through relatives he had in Memphis, and who was himself a widower. Spencer owned a chain of hardware stores in Colorado. He ardently wanted Carrie to marry him and move to Denver. Billy enthusiastically urged her to do it.

"You'd have a good life with Mr. Spencer, Mama," he told her. "It's a lot better than staying in Memphis and being known as the mother of a murderer."

"You are *not* a murderer!" his mother snapped.

"Well, the state of Tennessee says I am, Mama, and it's locked me up for life to prove it. Look," he tried to appeal to another side of her, "if you made a new life for yourself, it might persuade Ginny to do the same."

But Billy's mother was no more flexible than his wife had been.

"I'm sticking by you," she declared.

At Platt Penitentiary, Billy stood handcuffed and shackled before the desk of Warden Ed Harpole, a powerfully built man with an incongruously cherubic face.

"Billy Clyde," he said quietly, "we got lots of men in here who claim they're innocent, and most of the time I never pay any attention to

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them. But I've been following your case through a couple of friends of mine down in Kennant County, and very frankly I'm having a problem with your conviction for first-degree murder. I don't know if it's because of how that Bradford fellow handled you out in Texas, avoiding extradition and such, or if it's because I lost a nephew on that same island where you got shot in the head. Whatever the reason, I've decided to give you a break that I don't normally give lifers. I'm going to put you out on the farm where you'll have an easier time of it with those headaches people have told me about. I hope you appreciate this—and I hope you don't let me down."

The farm, Eddie thought.

Outside the walls. Where he could possibly escape. And there was no question in his mind that he would try.

He would try to get out, take Ginny and Betty Sue, and disappear.

When Ginny visited him and Billy told her of his plan, she tried desperately to talk him out of it.

"If you run," she said urgently, as they sat under a tree on the huge prison farm, "we'll never be able to get you a parole or a pardon. You'll ruin any chance your mama and I have of helping you."

"Honey, be sensible," Billy pleaded. "I'll never get out of here. Every time the governor considered pardoning me, or a parole board had me up for a hearing, somebody would remind them of that poor girl's body with the vultures picking at it." He shook his head. "I can't let Mama waste the rest of her life trying to do something that'll never happen. And you and Betty Sue spending the rest of your lives alone—no husband for you, no daddy for her—"

"Billy, sweetheart, *please,*" his wife pleaded, "don't do it. At least, think about it some more."

"All right," Billy finally said, "I'll wait a bit. I'll see how things go."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

It was the first time he had ever lied to Ginny Lee.

A week later, Billy dug under the cyclone fence surrounding the farm workers' barracks. He had no plan except to get away. No money, no outside help, nothing; all he intended to do was run and hide—somewhere, until he could figure a way, some way, somehow, to send for Ginny and Betty Sue.

Billy got only as far as the hamlet of Whitney, four miles away. There he was met by a county deputy with a bloodhound and a shotgun.

Back at the prison, Warden Harpole shook his head sadly. "Bad mistake, Billy. I'm sorry you made it."

He turned Billy over to the Captain of the Yard, where he was handcuffed to a whipping post, and lashed with a leather strap until blood plastered his clothes to his back and buttocks.

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Then he was locked down in solitary confinement.

After the futile escape attempt, further efforts on Billy's behalf by his mother and wife would have been pointless.

Urged on by Ginny, Carrie Allgood finally accepted Lewis Spencer's proposal and married the Colorado widower. She moved to Denver, leaving her house for Ginny and Betty Sue.

Ginny remained in Memphis, obtaining work as a department-store salesclerk. She was disappointed that Billy had broken his promise not to try escaping, but knowing the awful pressures that tormented him, she still stood by him, even though she too now believed that Billy would probably spend the rest of his life in prison.

Although there was some onus attached to remaining in Memphis, Ginny Lee never considered moving away; her daughter, she was determined, was going to grow up seeing her daddy as often as visits were allowed. Besides, living in Carrie Allgood's house, without rent, it would be easier to make ends meet. And there were a few supporters who believed that Dwight Graham had, indeed, railroaded Billy Clyde. Some even thought Billy had a right to try and escape.

Billy, meanwhile, had no choice but to settle into the life of a maximum security, locked-down Tennessee convict.

After Billy Clyde's conviction, Lon Bradford fell into very low spirits. A dejection settled over him, caused by an ongoing feeling that he had not done right by Billy.

Brad did not know if the emotion was caused by the manner in which he had interrogated Billy in Texas, getting him to admit that he might have committed the crime; or the way Brad had talked him into voluntarily returning to Tennessee; or the promises he had made to Billy about doctors helping mount a decent defense for him; or what.

All Brad knew was that his conscience was bothering him like the itch of a Mississippi River mosquito bite that wouldn't go away.

When Lon Bradford had given up his Kennant County sheriff's badge and opened his one-man private detective agency, it was with the notion that he was going to put all the ignominious areas of crime behind him: no more murders, robberies, shootings, stabbings, rapes. In the future he would be able to deal with the softer side of crime: insurance fraud, embezzlement, employee dishonesty, skip tracing—work that let him be more of a *detective* than a gun-toting lawman.

And that's the way it had been—until the day Judge Sam Norvell had come into his office and started calling him "son."

And involved him in murder.

Gnawingly troubled by it all, and after reading in the paper about Billy Clyde's failed escape attempt, Brad drove up to the pen at

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Platt and visited Billy.

"What the hell do you want, you bastard?" the young convict asked. Billy was cuffed and belly-chained, shackles on his ankles, standing behind a thick grille, not entitled to contact visits since his capture.

"I don't know what I want," Brad admitted. "Mostly just to say I'm sorry, I guess."

"Sorry 'bout what?" Billy challenged. "That I didn't get the electric chair?"

"No. Sorry that I didn't do things differently."

"Like what?"

"Like not talking you into coming back to Tennessee. If I'd have left you in custody in Texas, there would have had to be an extradition hearing, you would have had a Texas state public defender, they may have had doctors down there examine you—I don't know, a lot of things might have happened. With those headaches and blackouts of yours, maybe the most you'd have been convicted of would have been involuntary manslaughter. The maximum that carries is fifteen years. You could be getting out in twelve—"

"What are you telling me all this shit for, you son of a bitch?" Billy exploded. "You trying to drive me crazy or something? I'm in for *life!*"

"I just thought—"

"I don't care what you thought! Get the hell outta here!"

"Look, Billy, I want to try and help you in some way —"

"You go to hell!"

Billy turned away and hobbled back to his escort guard, leaving Bradford alone on the other side of the grille.

A week later, Brad went to visit Ginny Lee Clyde at the home of Billy's mother in Memphis. His reception there was not much warmer than it had been at Platt. Facing the young woman through the screen door, he said, "Mrs. Clyde, may I speak to you for a few minutes?"

"What in the world about?" Ginny Lee asked in cold astonishment.

"About Billy. I—I want to try and help in some way. May I come in?"

"Lord, no! This is Billy's mother's house! If I let you set foot inside, she'd skin me alive!"

"Well, would you come out here on the porch and let me talk to you?"

"I don't see what good it would do—"

"Please. Just for a minute or two."

Ginny unhooked the screen door and came out. They sat in two white wicker chairs.

"I went to see Billy. He got angry and wouldn't talk to me."

"What'd you expect him to do: Greet you like an old friend?"

"No, but I hoped he'd listen to me."

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"He listened to you once, and look where it got him." She tilted her head curiously. "Just how did you plan to help him?"

"I don't really know," Brad admitted. "I just feel like I've got to try and do something to make up for the mistake I made in talking him into coming back to Tennessee."

"What's done can't be undone," Ginny said sharply. "Really, Mr. Bradford, I don't see any point to this conversation." She rose. "Excuse me now."

"Wait, please," said Brad, also rising. "Until I can figure out something else, maybe I can help you and your daughter. How do you plan to get along?"

"I have a sales job in ladies' shoes at Goldsmith's Department Store. Billy's mother owns this house, so there's no rent. And he still has his eighty-percent disability pension; Tennessee can't take *that* away from him. My daughter and I will do fine, thank you. Good day, Mr. Bradford."

Ginny left him standing on the porch just like Billy had left him standing in the visiting room.

Well, he thought, at least she didn't call me a son of a bitch.

Brad drove up to Nashville to see the state public defender.

"I want to find out just what kind of appeal can be mounted in Billy Clyde's case," he told Hershel Cox, the top state defender.

"This office can't appeal the case," Cox said. "We're not funded to appeal any sentence except death. If the boy had been given the chair, believe me, we'd be all over it right now. But there's nothing we can do about a life sentence. You'd have to hire private counsel for that. And, frankly, I don't think you'd get very far after that escape attempt he pulled."

"Could private counsel file on the basis of new evidence? Your deputy didn't bring any medical evidence in mitigation—"

"My deputy didn't *know* about any medical evidence," Cox replied without rancor. "All we had was what your D.A. down there, Dwight Graham, gave us. And he pushed that trial through so fast that we didn't even have time to assign an investigator to the case. My deputy asked for a continuance and old Judge Norvell denied the motion."

"So Graham railroaded Billy?"

"You said it, not me," Cox hedged.

"Can we bring up the medical history now as a basis for a new trial?"

Cox shook his head. "Not if it was available at the time of trial—which it was. We just didn't have it."

"So there's nothing?"

"You can take the matter to the state pardon board, but in my opinion it'll be a waste of time." Cox's voice turned sympathetic. "Look, I know how you feel about this; I feel the same way. I wish I

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could do something about it, but I can't. It's one of those cases that falls through the cracks in the system. Best thing any of us can do is just try and live with it."

Brad nodded wearily. "Easy for us to live with it out here," he said quietly, "but Billy Clyde has to live with it in Platt Penitentiary."

Three years passed. One day Warden Harpole had Billy brought to his office.

"Think you've learned your lesson, boy? About running?"

"Yessir," Billy said. "I'm real sorry I let you down, Warden."

"Your wife and daughter have been coming up here regular as clockwork every Sunday, haven't they?"

"Yessir."

"Takes a mighty good woman to stick by a lifer," the warden said.

"She is a mighty good woman, sir. Too good for me."

Harpole pondered for a moment, then asked, "You know what those little red-and-white cottages way over in the back corner of the farm are for?"

Billy felt his knees go weak. "Yessir, they're for family visits. For honor prisoners."

"Next Sunday," Harpole said, "you and your wife and daughter can have one of those for the day. You can cook a meal in there, listen to the radio; there's a bedroom if you want to send your little girl out to the children's play yard for a while."

Billy had to choke back tears. "I don't know what to say, Mr. Harpole, sir—"

"You don't have to say anything. But if you ever try to run off on me again, boy, when they bring you back you're going to wear leg irons for the rest of your life. You'll eat, sleep, and shit in leg irons. You get me?"

"I'll never run again, Warden. I swear."

Billy meant to keep the promise this time.

He and Ginny and Betty Sue began having cottage visits once a month, and for all of them it was like being reborn. They were a family again—even if it was for only one day at a time.

And eventually Harpole gave Billy still another chance to prove himself: He put Billy back on the farm and gave him the job of raising and caring for the prison's stock of hogs.

During those years, Lon Bradford continued his efforts to win favor with Billy and Ginny Lee Clyde. He wrote letters of petition to the governor, lieutenant governor, state senators, and representatives in Nashville, members of the pardon board, clergymen, and prominent business leaders. Some of the replies he received, while not outright negative, were less than promising. Most people seemed to naively believe that the justice system would eventually

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right any wrong it had perpetrated. But Brad kept trying.

He kept visiting Billy up in Platt, too, girding himself each visit to accept the scathing verbal abuse that the young convict consistently heaped upon him. But Billy, to Brad's surprise, never *refused* to see him; he simply made the visits as unpleasant as possible.

Brad made weekly calls on Ginny Lee Clyde as well. Sometimes he got no farther than standing at the screen door, but always managed to blurt out who he had written letters to that week, who he had received replies from, and any new vulgar names Billy might have called him on his most recent visit. For the most part, Ginny found the latter more amusing than not.

"You'll have to admit, Mr. Bradford, he's coming up with some very colorful language."

Once in a while, if Brad caught her in a weak moment—when she was tired or just generally depressed—she would come out onto the porch and sit with him for ten or fifteen minutes, mostly talking about either Billy or Betty Sue. Once she even gave him a glass of lemonade.

Brad felt he was making at least slight progress.

Back in Kennant County, Lon Bradford was no longer a popular person in the town of Lamont. Dwight Graham refused to even speak to him. Judge Sam Norvell was frigidly courteous, in keeping with his Southern-gentleman persona, but it was clear that the days of him calling Brad "son" were over. Bobby Leonard, who had been reelected for a second term as sheriff, was friendly when he and Brad were in private, but distant when others were present.

"Why don't you drop this business, Brad?" Bobby asked frankly one day. "It's not doing any good; you're not going to be able to get Billy Clyde a new trial. All you're doing is turning people against you."

"I'm doing it because it's *right,* Bobby," the private detective replied. "You know, I did some damned good detective work on that case. Hadn't been for me, nobody would've ever *heard* of Billy Clyde. I tracked him down and I caught up with him. Problem is, I threw him to the wolves: you, Dwight, the judge, the townspeople, the system. I promised to get him a fair shake, because I thought you all were my friends and would back me up. Instead, you tried to send him to the hot seat as quick as you could, and didn't even give him a chance to properly defend himself. But I'm sticking by my word, Bobby. I'm *still* trying to get him a fair deal."

Bobby Leonard had merely shaken his head and walked away."

Occasionally, Brad would run into one or both of the Hardin cousins, or one or the other of Abby Craft's parents, or a known member of the Klan, like the day he was approached on the sidewalk by Buster Doss, a longtime KKK member, who said, "You ain't welcome in Lamont no more, Bradford. Best thing you can do

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is jus' stay the hell outta our town."

Brad smiled at the fat, tobacco-chewing redneck and said, "Hey, Buster, you know why Klansmen wear those pointed hats? It's because you've all got pointed heads."

Buster closed his fists and took a menacing step forward. Brad, lean and sinewy, did not budge an inch.

"Go on, try it, Buster," he said evenly. "I'll whip your fat ass all over the town square."

Buster spat tobacco juice into the street and walked away.

After Billy had been inside for seven years, he and Ginny got careless during one of their cottage visits. Ginny became pregnant. Billy was greatly disturbed by the news.

"I've got to find some way to get out of here now, honey," he told her quietly after hearing about it. "You can't manage by yourself with a new baby—"

"You stop that kind of talk right now," Ginny lambasted him. "I can so manage. I've got money saved, we've still got your disability pension, Betty Sue's old enough to help with the baby, and you know your mama will come back and stay with me for a while." She gripped Billy's hands. "Oh, honey, this is a sign, I just know it is. God is giving us this baby to tell us there's a future for us. This baby means you'll get out someday!"

Billy was not convinced that the baby meant anything but more struggling for Ginny and Betty Sue, but he did not have the heart to add to her burden by trying to escape again then. Even if he made it this time, what good would it do? Ginny couldn't go on the run with him while she was pregnant.

He would wait.

"You're right, honey," he said, so as not to upset her. "I guess we'll just have to keep putting our hope in the future."

The next summer, when their baby boy was born, Ginny insisted they name him Billy Clyde, Jr.

Over time, both Ginny's and Billy's attitude toward Lon Bradford had softened.

"He seems to honestly want to help us, honey," Ginny said. "And I truly believe he thought things would turn out different when he talked you into coming back to Tennessee. It was those so-called friends of his in Kennant County that double-crossed him."

"It's still his fault I'm in here," Billy reminded her.

"I know, but it might not be *all* his fault," Ginny said quietly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, you don't *know,* honey, whether you killed that poor girl or not. We've talked about this. You said yourself you might have done it during one of your blackouts. Mr. Bradford says if that's so, then you wouldn't be a murderer 'cause you wouldn't have known what

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you were doing; you wouldn't have been able to control yourself."

Billy sat and put his face in his hands. "Every time I think I might have done it, I want to take a razor blade and cut open my wrists—"

"Don't you talk like that," Ginny scolded. "We've always got hope." She bit her bottom lip, then added, "It might help if we was both to be a little nicer to Mr. Bradford, though."

One day when Brad came to visit at the house, Ginny Lee invited him in to see the new baby boy. Ginny's mother-in-law, Carrie Allgood Spencer, was there. Brad stopped in his tracks at the sight of her, dreading what she might say. Or do.

"Oh, come on in," Carrie said impatiently. "I'm not going to bite you. Billy and Ginny have been telling me how hard you've been working trying to help us. Ginny also told me how things happened up in Kennant County, and how you've lost all your friends because of it."

"Well, ma'am," Brad said, relieved, "I guess they weren't really friends, after all."

Out of the blue, Carrie invited him to stay for supper. Afterwards, they sat out on the porch and Brad was allowed to rock the baby.

"Brad, do you think there's *any* hope my boy will ever get out?" Carrie asked. "Please be honest."

"There's always hope, ma'am," Brad hedged. "Especially as time goes by. The longer he's in, the more it fades what he's in for. Pardon boards change their members, sympathies come a little easier. But for right now, well, I don't have a lot of hope."

Carrie sighed. "Lord, it's so hard to think about him spending the rest of his life in that place. You know, my husband, Mr. Spencer, back in Denver, belongs to the same Eagles Lodge where Senator Walter Mashburn is a member. Lewis, my husband, has said more than once how he wishes he knew a senator in Tennessee instead of Colorado to go to for help."

Brad stopped rocking the baby and stared at the older woman. "Your husband knows Walter Mashburn?"

"Why, yes. We both do. Why are you staring at me like that?"

Handing the baby to Ginny, Brad said, "Because you and Lewis don't have to know a senator from Tennessee. Walter Mashburn knows *both* senators from Tennessee." He rose and paced the porch. "If I go back to Colorado with you, Carrie, can you and Lewis get me an appointment with Senator Mashburn?"

Carrie Allgood Spencer, along with her husband, Lewis, could and did arrange for Lon Bradford to meet the senior United States senator from Colorado.

Wearing rancher's garb and Western boots, the senator listened without interruption as Brad told the long, convoluted story of Billy Clyde's journey from Hen Hill on Okinawa to the penitentiary in

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Platt. When Brad finished, the senator gave him quite a stern look.

"Doesn't sound like you did the boy much of a favor, skirting around the extradition process like you did."

"No, sir," Brad admitted. "And it's been gnawing at me ever since. That's why I'm still involved in it."

"A case might be made that you moved him from Texas to Tennessee illegally. The matter of withholding, or at least not providing, adequate medical testimony bothers me, too. Mr. Bradford, I'd like you to write up a complete abstract of Billy Clyde's case for me, from its beginning up to the present. I'm going to see if there's anything I can do about it when I get back to Washington. No promises, understand—so don't get the family's hopes up."

When he returned to the Capitol, Senator Walter Mashburn telephoned his party's U.S. senator from Tennessee, Harry Voss.

"Harry, I'd like to buy your supper tonight," Mashburn said. "Got a little story I think might interest you."

That evening, Mashburn told his fellow senator the history of Billy Clyde's case, as it had been related to him by Lon Bradford. Voss listened politely, but was reluctant to become involved.

"It's a state matter, Walt," he said. "If Clyde was in a federal prison, why, it'd be a different situation. But I don't want to step on any toes in Nashville."

"I don't see that you'd be stepping on that many," Mashburn opined. "Clyde's a decorated World War Two combat soldier, so you'd have the veterans groups behind you. And the fact that he's on an eighty-percent disability pension, but didn't get any real medical help at his trial, will probably get you a lot of support from the medical community, not to mention the bar association." Pausing, Mashburn lowered his voice to a confidential tone. "Harry, something like this could become a real sticky problem if the wrong people got interested in it. Somebody running against you in the next election might make a nasty issue of it. You've got a chance to take care of it before it gets messy. At least have one of your people in Nashville look into it. As a favor to me."

"All right," the Tennessee senator reluctantly agreed.

In Platt, Billy had begun seriously to worry about Ginny now that she had both Billy, Jr. and Betty Sue to care for on her own.

"Besides, it's different with a boy," he confided to, of all people, Lon Bradford. "It was one thing to have Ginny raising Betty Sue. Girls are mostly raised by their mamas anyway. But now I've got a son and he's going ot be growing up with no daddy. What happens when he's old enough to go to school and the other boys begin to poke fun at him for not having a daddy? And what happens when they find out he *does* have one—and that Daddy's a convicted killer?"

"Betty Sue got through it fine," Brad pointed out.

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"That was back then," Billy countered, "when there was folks that believed I was innocent. They stood behind Ginny and Betty Sue. But it's been over eleven years, Brad. People forget a lot in eleven years. Little Billy won't get the support that Betty Sue had. There won't be nobody to help him through the bad times." He looked solemnly at his friend. "I need to get out of here, Brad," he said quietly. "One way or another."

Bradford frowned. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"Maybe."

"Billy, don't be a damned fool. Your mother and I have a United States senator interested in your case. He's already trying to do something for you in Washington, D.C."

"Washington ain't Tennessee," Billy countered. "Now listen, I'm trusting you not to mention this to Ginny. Don't you let me down. Give me your word you won't say nothing."

Lon Bradford reluctantly gave his word.

He felt he owed Billy Clyde that much.

In his Washington office, Tennessee senator Harry Voss studied a long memorandum he had received from an aide in Nashville. A troubled expression came over his face. After he read it a second time, he flipped an intercom switch.

"Get Eugene Price in the Nashville office on the line, please," he told his secretary. While he waited, the senator drummed impatient fingers on his desktop. When the extension finally rang, he snatched it up and asked without preliminary, "Gene, did you check out everything you put in that memo about the Clyde boy?"

"Yes, sir, Senator," came the answer.

"No hitches anywhere? Nothing to trip us up?"

"It all checks out, sir. Everything in the Memphis private detective's report was true."

"And Clyde is still a model prisoner?"

"Yes, sir. He's had no disciplinary action since that would-be escape attempt when he first got there—more than ten years ago."

The senator's troubled expression deepened. It was fourteen years since V-J Day, World War Two was a fading memory, even the so-called Korean "police action" was over. Trouble was brewing in Cuba, and far across the Pacific Ocean a little country named Laos was asking the U.S. for aid against aggressor troops from North Vietnam. Closer to home, integration problems were fermenting in his own state of Tennessee, as well as all over the South. There was plenty for him to be concerned about besides some convict doing life in Platt.

But Harry Voss was concerned about him anyway.

"Call the governor's secretary and have her reserve an hour for me at the governor's convenience day after tomorrow," he told his aide in Nashville. When the senator disconnected, he flipped the

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intercom key again. "Get me on a plane to Nashville late tomorrow afternoon, please."

On the day that Billy Clyde began his twelfth year in prison, he was in the final phase of preparations for his second escape attempt.

This time, he was not simply going to run away, as he had done when he was a "new fish" doing his first year. This time, he had a *plan.*

First, clothes. A con he knew in the tailor shop was fashioning a pair of trousers and a shirt that looked like regular civilian work clothes. Another con in the shoe shop was cutting down a pair of high-top work shoes and dyeing them black for him. The clothes and shoes would be wrapped and buried just inside the fence where Billy was going to dig out.

Money. He had sixty-two dollars in singles and fives rolled up and hidden in the bottom of a tobacco can. He had saved it a little at a time from money Ginny and, later, Brad had given him for the prison commissary.

Maps. He had Esso gas station road maps of Tennessee, Missouri, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana, all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. Billy had paid to have them smuggled in by the brother of another con.

A route. He intended to dig out right after the breakfast count and head directly to the Mississippi River, six miles away, running through the fields and woods with the bundle of clothes and shoes under his arm. When he got to the river, he would wash and change clothes. Then he'd hike down the river and catch a ferry across to Caruthersville, Missouri.

By the noon count, which is when his escape would be discovered, he would have stowed away on some cargo or livestock barge going south on the Mississippi River. He would stay on the barge until he got to West Memphis, Arkansas, then get off and walk across the bridge into Mississippi. Hitchhiking south on Route 61, by nightfall he hoped to be halfway down the state toward the Louisiana line.

Billy had every confidence that he would make it this time. And after a year or so, when he got settled somewhere under a new name, he would contact Ginny and have her and the children quietly depart Memphis some night, leaving everything behind, and join him.

It would work.

It *had* to work.

Two days after reading the report of his aide, Senator Harry Voss spent an hour in the office of Tennessee governor Frank Purcell, a fellow party member and longtime friend and political ally.

No written record was kept of the conversation between the two men, but exactly one week later, the five members of the Ten-

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nessee Parole Board all gathered at Platt Penitentiary for an unscheduled, unannounced—and unpublicized—special meeting.

Billy Clyde was walking toward the fence, ready to dig out, when he saw the captain's Jeep driving toward him, with Warden Harpole in the passenger seat. As they approached, Billy felt ill.

They done found out, he thought. *They done caught me.*

In the split instant that the Jeep drew near, Billy remembered the warden's long-ago warning: *If you ever try to run off on me again, you'll wear leg irons for the rest of your life.*

But when the Jeep came to a stop, there were smiles on the faces of the captain and the warden.

"Get in the backseat, Billy," the warden said. "Got a little surprise for you up at the office."

When the three men arrived at the administration offices, Billy was taken to a conference room and directed to a chair facing a long table at which sat the five members of the Tennessee Parole Board.

"Convict Billy Clyde," the chairman said without preliminary, "this board has decided, on the basis of your record here at Platt, to set the term of your sentence at twelve years and one month. This decision does not reflect on or change in any way your conviction for first-degree murder, which will stand. Your release will be in the form of ordinary parole except for one condition: You must agree to leave the state of Tennessee and never again visit this state or take up residence here. You must also agree never to initiate a civil lawsuit of any kind against the state of Tennessee. You will remain on parole for as long as this board or its successors determines necessary. Is all of that clear to you, Convict Clyde?"

"Uh—yes—yes, sir—" Billy was stunned.

"Do you agree to leave the state permanently? And to the other terms?"

"Yessir—yessir, I do—"

"Sign this agreement to that effect, please," the chairman instructed, pushing a typed sheet of paper across the table.

With a trembling hand, Billy signed for his freedom.

On the day Billy Clyde was released from prison, he was met by his mother, her husband Lewis, Ginny and his two children, and a tall, older man whom he had never seen before.

"Son," his mother introduced, "this is Senator Walter Mashburn, of Colorado. He's the man who got you out."

"Hello, Billy," the senator said, offering his hand. "I thought I'd tag along today to personally invite you to come to Colorado with me." He winked. "Kind of an official escort, you might say."

As he shook hands with Senator Mashburn, Billy was too choked up even to speak.

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As they walked toward a station wagon Lewis Spencer had hired, Billy glanced over and saw Lon Bradford standing by his own car in the parking lot.

"Folks, excuse me. I need a minute," Billy said.

He walked over to the Memphis private detective and the two men faced each other in silence.

"I don't know what to say," Billy spoke first.

"Me either," said Brad.

"You started out as my worst enemy and ended up my best friend."

"I'm glad about that last part, and sorry about the first."

Billy looked down at the ground. "Do you think I done it, Brad? Do you think I killed that girl?"

"I think you could have, in one of your blackouts. But as I told you before, if you did do it, the law, properly administered, wouldn't have called it murder; it would be manslaughter. You would have gotten fifteen years, probably got out in twelve—which is what you served. I think there's a good chance that one or both of those Hardin boys might have done it. Then they saw you in the pickup with Texas plates and made up a story to shift attention away from themselves."

"You think we'll ever know for sure?"

Brad shook his head. "Probably not. I think this is the end of it." He looked over at the people waiting for Billy. "Going up to Colorado, huh?"

"Yeah. Mr. Spencer's going to teach me the hardware business."

"Sounds like nice, stress-free work."

Billy grinned. "I sure hope so."

The private detective and the paroled convict shook hands and said goodbye.

Lon Bradford went back to his small private detective agency in Memphis, doing mostly insurance-fraud cases, some divorce work, occasional dishonest-employee surveillance—nothing heavy, certainly nothing like the Abby Craft case.

Brad's former friends in Lamont—the judge, district attorney, sheriff, most of the townsfolk—took to avoiding him so resolutely that eventually he simply stayed out of Kennant County altogether.

Several years went by without his hearing from Billy and Ginny Lee Clyde, and then one day a birth announcement arrived in the mail. Billy and Ginny were the parents of a third child, another son.

They had named him Bradford Clyde.

Reading it with a pleased look on his face, Brad propped his feet up on the desk, took a bottle of factory liquor out of a drawer, and had himself a good sip. Bradford Clyde, he thought. That sure was something. ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

SHIRLEY HILLMAN

by Pauly Nelson

I was born on the first day of spring in the year of Our Lord 1918, as my mother would have said. People don't refer to important dates in their lives that way anymore, but in the time of my youth—in the place of my youth—the days were still considered those of the Lord.

I count the memories of those years and those people, for the fullness and mystery of their lives is greater to me now than it was in the times when I knew them. Some of what I recall is clear and direct, but not all. I've learned that remembrance is often better wooed than pressed and that the most powerful memories come to me as shadows and random joinings. Other times, though, a memory will come to me like the moan of a whistle sounding through the night, and then I'll wake to the bright-lit corridors of this nursing home and think that it must be the preacher's Second Coming, or morning at the very least. But then, if I rise and go to meet whoever has come for me, someone dressed in white on white will lead me back to bed and I'll find that I've been passed over again.

Memories can be frighteningly strong. There are days when my mind sinks so deeply into their power that I can no longer distinguish past from present, and what is real becomes whatever I'm living at the moment. For instance: Right now I could not name the street that runs before the door of this nursing home, but I can describe in exact detail the patterns of whirling color made by yel-

Polly Nelson, a.k.a. "Pauly" (she adopted the pen name when she discovered there was already a Polly Nelson in the field), lives "in a forest atop a hill at the end of a long drive in Western New Jersey." She told us that she has an MFA from New York University and recently left a job directing children's theater to concentrate on writing mystery stories. This is her first paid publication; she's off to a good start! ¶

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low toadflax and purple loosestrife along the dirt meadow road outside the windows of my childhood.

The staff tries to keep that from happening here. They bring people in to cheer us up, to keep us current with the times: small children who sing childish songs off-key, teenagers with stiff hair and braced metal smiles. Middle-aged women come to save our souls or their own by teaching us to vent frustration onto homemade flour-salt dough. I hate them. I don't want to fill my days with baskets and trivets and dough for sculpting. I want to be left alone. There are things I must think about, worry through, understand, before it is too late. I have dreams to be woven and puzzles to solve: half-truths to knead into some semblance of form before that light that comes to wake me in the night is something other than the morning crew changing guard.

In this nursing home, the hallways are wide and paved with linoleum. Winters when I stretch from my bed, I still feel the shock of their cold indifference against the soles of my feet. In my mother's home, the home of my youth, the floors were all of wood, broad boards laid groove against groove to fight their natural warpage, and our hallways were narrow, like some warren of secret passages burrowing one into another all the way back through to the half-curved stairs that led to the top and my bedroom.

The land outside that bedroom window is as clear to me as if I stood there now. Close to the house but across the road is a fenced area with twenty or more chickens and one rooster that I had to grain-feed morning and night. Beyond the chickens stand eight thin brown cows, huddled barely seen against the hay barn. The barn itself is the color of sun-baked sod, looking much like an ancient mound covered over by the soil on which it rests.

In the near distance, tall trees mark the banks of the Tennybrook Stream, and although they can't be seen from here, the railroad tracks run there as well, and passing trains can be heard the year round. The road between our house and barn runs straight on for a quarter-mile up a small hill to the tenant house where a woman came to live in the spring of 1933 and was killed in the fall that same year. I'm certain that the year was 1933. I'm not positive of her name. I don't think my family often called her by name, but as best I can recall, her name was something like Shirley Hillman—although given the sheer hungry sadness of the times, her name could have been that of any woman.

I don't know a whole lot about history. The little I can attach to specific dates is mostly dry and rote, similar to but probably less accurate than the kind of information found in any general text. What I do remember are the human daily doings not often recorded in books for posterity. I remember the cellar we entered

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from a door in an outside room and the yeasty-damp smell of last summer's potato crop, spring-softened and gone to seed. I remember days of green-tomato pie, the sweet acid flavor of it for lunch and dinner, and maybe breakfast more than once. And the burnt black-water taste of chicory coffee half cut with whole milk just brought in from the cow.

I remember trudging off to school in a cut-down coat lined with old blanket leavings. To protect my legs below the coat, I wore cotton stockings held up at the knees by ties that blocked circulation but still allowed the cloth to bunch thickly around my ankles. I remember one warm early spring when my mother made me continue to wear two sets of underwear, not for warmth, but so that I might look less thin, less like a poor child painfully starving.

I remember endlessly boring summers. So boring that for entertainment, after finishing up my chores, I would go to sit on the banks alongside Tennybrook Stream, my toes in the water and my butt on a moss-grown rock, and wait for the excitement of the afternoon freight coming through.

Summers, those trains would be hauling stock: slatted cars full of sheep and cattle or squalling great hogs, sometimes tiers crammed high with cooped-up chickens. And riding the flatbeds or empty sidecars right alongside the stock for slaughter would be harvest workers, mostly men still close to being boys, who'd wave or smile on their way past to somewhere else.

Maybe it happened too gradually for a young girl to notice, but I do remember that by the summer of '33, the people riding the trains included some women and occasionally even a child or two and many more older men, all of them poorly dressed, and when they passed, the smiles were much less frequent, and we no longer called them harvest workers. We began to call them hoboes.

Still, I loved to sit there by the hour, watching the water run downstream away from us and waiting for a train to pass away on the tracks beyond the stream, and I don't think it ever once occurred to me that there might be something going on out there at the end of all that rushing until the summer Shirley Hillman came to stay.

I never really knew Shirley Hillman. She was more of a game for me, a way of livening up the dreariness of another long, dull summer. I never found out what brought her to live in that unfortunate little house up the road from ours. Maybe she rented it. Maybe she bought it, or simply squatted there for lack of somewhere else to be. People did that sort of thing in the 'thirties, even good people. Perfectly good, Christian men and women found themselves doing things during the years of the Depression that they would never have done otherwise. I can say that now, but it's taken me the better part of sixty years to mean it.

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I don't remember Shirley ever having any husband, although there were men there at times. Maybe one of them was her husband, maybe he settled her there before running down the hill and bumming a slow freight to Chicago or St. Louis. That wasn't uncommon, either. During the Depression, lots of men felt trapped and took to doing crazy things. More than a few left their homes and families and went to look elsewhere, for work or a better life or what have you. Women, too. I remember that she had a child, must have been about two years old, but I don't know what became of him after Shirley's death.

They never found out who killed Shirley Hillman. I'm not sure how hard they tried, or even who "they" would have been. Officials, I guess, someone connected with the police in the town twenty miles away. There was talk: Maybe it was some hobo she'd allowed to sleep on the porch who had drunk too much, or maybe she'd had too much herself and just fell. But I knew it couldn't be anything that simple. I remember hearing that the blow to the back of her head carried enough force to flatten her skull in several places, although even that was strange, because it happened in such a way that the scalp remained unbroken. No blood was spilled.

Shirley Hillman, and the way her brief life changed the life of my family, is a fragment, an image that I've been working on for weeks now. Thinking back, I've come to realize that I've been working on her memory for the better part of my life, so that I'm no longer sure exactly what happened there that summer and what has happened since in my dreams, but the reality no longer matters. For me, Shirley Hillman has come to represent everything about those years of the Depression, and in my heart I recognize that the essence of my memory of her is truth.

The nurses here come into my room sometimes to tell me about some wonderful show everyone else is watching on the television. If I motion them out or ignore the turned-on set, they'll sneak up behind me and adjust my hearing aid. I leave the television going to keep them away but I always turn the hearing aid off. When I have it up full volume, what I get is noise from the hallway, the echoes of feet and trays and bedpans and their damned cheerful voices. When I turn everything off, I can hear birds and squirrels and the chime of the mantel clock that used to wake me the Saturday nights I slept in my grandfather's house.

I don't remember a great deal of my mother's father, but his house seemed to me like the house of God. He owned a mansion that had two parlors downstairs, where guests seemed afraid to sit, and six bedrooms up, where everyone separated to sleep. The entry-hall floor was covered in Oriental rugs that I was never allowed to step on, and beyond them, an oval-shaped Atwater

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Kent radio sat on a red velvet runner atop an otherwise empty library table. Only my grandfather was allowed to turn that radio on or off.

Once a month, weather permitting, my mother and I would drive the twenty miles from our farm into town to sleep at my grandfather's house and attend Sunday services the next morning. In addition to owning the town's general store, my grandfather was an Episcopal lay preacher in the town's finest church. Every Sunday he stood on a small speaker's platform beside the minister's pulpit. The wall behind the two of them contained an imported lead-glass window that on sunny days would wash the high walls with rainbow patterns and focus a light the color of pale Communion wine onto my grandfather's solemn countenance.

I think I was always afraid of him. He had a deep, slow voice that sounded to me like the personal voice of God, and when he spoke, people listened. I think my mother feared him as well, although I know he loved her and she loved him. Once, when I asked my mother how she came to marry my father, she told me that they'd met when she was working at her father's store. My mother started to work in the store immediately after graduating high school and continued to work there until the week before she married my father.

One weekend I pretended illness so that I might stay home with my father rather than sit like a trespasser in the house of God. Even my father ordinarily didn't work a full day on Sundays, but as I had already claimed to be too ill to get out of bed, he left soon after breakfast. Gone fishing, I supposed, for I could hear him whistling in the distance. I think that this memory has special power for me because it was the only time I every heard him whistle near the house. His favorite songs were from the 'twenties and the sound of popular music annoyed my mother. I watched him from my bedroom window, almost skipping along with his pole and pail. Then I went into their bedroom and opened the lockbox where my mother kept her papers.

I didn't look there expecting to find anything; that wasn't the point. I looked because I was supposed not to and that was reason enough. It wasn't especially interesting to me then, just legal documents and an ugly brooch that had probably been in her family for years. Of course I had to try that on and in the process I stuck my finger and splattered blood onto the papers. Except for the blood, I would probably not even have noticed the marriage license which listed my parents' ages: On the day of their marriage, my mother was thirty-three and my father was twenty-five. After rubbing red stain into that, I went on to wipe across the original deed to the farm, signed as purchaser by my grandfather, three weeks before my parents' marriage. I'm not sure what that meant. It

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could have been money owed to my mother for all those years supplying other women with goods for their children and husbands and homes. I suspect that it was purchase money to buy her a husband and home of her own.

The heat in this nursing home comes off radiators that run along two sides of my room. Late mornings, when the heat crackles through here really high, I like to sit with my feet propped against the narrow radiator lengths and remember those times as a child when I would sit before the stove and warm my feet after school. When I can get it here, I like a cup of hot chocolate, and although they make it thin, from water, I can rest my eyes and remember afternoons of hot cocoa thick from sugar and whole milk, steaming and slightly scorched on the grill that was bolted just in front of the ridge where my mother heated her irons.

My mother had three matching irons, fine big heavy ones that were her pride and joy, a gift from her own mother on the occasion of her marriage. One of them had a narrow pointed end, suitable for pressing the tucks into delicate ladies' crinoline. A second was for a man's high-starched Sunday shirts, and the third one was used on heavy work clothes. My mother's mother died when I was still quite young. The only thing I remember of her was that she was always dressed as though my grandfather and the church might press her into service at any moment.

All that fuss over appearances seems foolish now, especially when you consider that many times our clothes had to be washed in soap so poor nothing ever really looked clean. There was no such thing as white. But the type of clothes you wore and their condition when you wore them was important to my mother. However yellowed or patched, she always ironed everything we wore—right down to the Lindsay-cotton handkerchiefs she made me carry everywhere I went, just in case.

In all fairness, I don't think it was simply a matter of appearance. I think that ironing clothes represented an attitude towards life, a refusal to regress to the degradation and dirt and aimlessness too many people felt in their lives during the early 'thirties. The routine of it was a way of resisting breakdown; the same as my going to school and my father's tending the farm.

The difficulty of those times threatened everything, especially long-standing institutions as fundamental as the government and the church and extending right on down to the basic family unit.

My mother liked routine and she liked the complicated business of ironing. Every morning when I left the house, my mother did a wash. Winters, she would drape the wet clothes on a line across the back porch wall, and by the time I returned in late afternoon, her irons—aligned like weapons along the back of the stove—would be ready to wax and attack the wind-set wrinkles. The irons

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had to be hot, not just to smooth the clothes but to melt the blocks of blue ironing wax that made it possible for a hot iron to glide over cloth without burning. If the iron cooled too fast, the congealed wax would pull off in thin blue flakes that had to be gathered and melted again. Even a small amount of ironing might require reheating an iron. But not for Mother: She had those three fine heavy irons to hold the heat and to thereby hold the disintegrating world outside at bay.

They have this pretty little curly-haired helper here who comes around sometimes and tries to get us to exercise. Walk and stretch and lift these pastel hand weights. Curly likes to talk about modern medicine and all the new ways to guard against the losses of ageing. She was surprised at my strength when I lifted a ten-pound weight so I told her about my mother's irons and how she could swing them around like mini dumbbells.

Shirley Hillman was weak. I'm sure she did not iron. I doubt that she even washed her clothes very often. That might seem a somewhat trivial matter, since she probably didn't often know where her next meal would come from, either. But ironing wasn't trivial to a woman like my mother, a woman determined to maintain a certain civilized manner of life, especially given the circumstances of the times.

My mother had a number of strictly enforced rules designed to separate us from those whom others might have referred to as poor white trash. My father always wore a shirt when he ate at the table. An ironed shirt. If he came in for lunch and it was ninety degrees outside, he could either wash and put on a shirt, or take his food on the back step.

We always wiped our feet before opening the door. The only time I can remember breaking that rule without punishment was the day that Shirley Hillman died. Those years seemed to be one continuous drought, but when it finally rained after a long dry spell, the vegetation would be so sparse that the barren soil turned to mud. I remember a downpour on the day Shirley died and how wet the road was coming home. I'd heard about the killing in school and I remember the sucking noises my shoes made as I slogged through the muck in front of Shirley's house and ran down the hill for home and then on into our kitchen, soaked and slinging off my fallen stockings. There stood my mother, ironing as usual, tight-lipped, saying *I know,* pointing at the prints I'd made on her clean kitchen floor.

There's a nurse here who thinks that I'm more than one person. Sometimes she'll stick her head in my door and say: *How're we doing today?* That bit of craziness doesn't bother me so much; I've heard otherwise intelligent people address children and old women as though they were seeing double before. But the thing

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she does that really gets my attention is refer to herself as though she were the one who's doubled. The first time she came into my room and said: *Won't you take your medicine like a good girl for Nurse Rumpling?* I said: *Who the hell is Nurse Rumpling? I don't even know a Nurse Rumpling. Aren't we being silly today,* she giggled, *you know perfectly well that I'm your Nurse Rumpling.* Well, I wrote a letter to the home's administrator about Nurse Rumpling's split personality and how taxing it can be for people who can't get away from her—them—and now I have the reputation for being gossipy and overcritical.

My mother would have said the same thing. One of her strictest rules was never to speak ill of others, no matter that what was said might be truth. As a consequence of my mother's many rules, it took me quite a long while to realize how thoroughly Shirley Hillman had intruded into our lives. Mother would be talking to me, asking me about school or my chores or almost anything, and it wouldn't come to me until sometime afterwards that the topic had really been Shirley Hillman.

"Katherine," Mother might say, "I don't want you idling on your way home from school. You have chores here at home and you have plenty enough time for daydreaming after they're done."

At first hearing, such a speech seems innocent enough, except that before Shirley came, Mother had never told me to hurry home. It would have been poor behavior on her part—uncivilized—to say anything as direct as don't stop at Shirley Hillman's. But since Shirley's was the only house between the school drop and home, the message was there all the same.

That didn't influence me, of course. Before Shirley I might have slowed some to skim flint rocks off Tennybrook Stream or, especially during late spring, have detoured into the swale meadow to chase a few mate-slowed whirlabouts. But after Shirley, butterfly courtship seemed too tame. I would hurry to reach that point of the hill where her house came into view and from then on, I would saunter the hundred yards or so until I'd passed her front stoop. She would often be sitting there, her child playing with a broken wheel in the dirt. She always said hello and waved, and on good days she wouldn't be alone.

At that time, the rail bed just beyond Tennybrook Stream bent back in a sharp right curve and freights passing through for Chicago would be forced to slow. Often one or two men would jump the train at that point. Hoboes, I guess, probably lured by the way the stream widened just before the turn, lazing out into a stretch of slow-turning eddies. The water there looked warmer than it ever felt and after a cold swim, the men would occasionally make their way up to Shirley's house, although they never seemed to stay too long.

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In the early evenings here, the home's lights are very bright—two hundred watts, every one of them—because old eyes don't see so well and they don't want us falling over anything obvious in the hallways. But I can see much clearer in the dimness that comes later, about eleven o'clock, when they cut the power way back. Then I find it much easier to make the rounds of my room, and when I look out the high-silled windows, instead of seeing the heavy brick veneer of our sister wing across the courtyard, I can again look through a dust-hazed field to the glow of the oil lamps in Shirley Hillman's house.

One of the men who came to Shirley's house was not the same as all the others. He was really just a boy, not much older than I was. He stayed with her for a week or ten days and I spent all those nights with my head against the window sill, watching for the light to flicker out up the dirt meadow road. I remember going past one afternoon, seeing the three of them sitting there on the splintered rail ties that served the old house for steps. Shirley was holding her child, and the boy was half lying beside her, one hand resting on her knee. I must have been staring, because he looked right at me and grinned, as if he knew something about me or knew my family. Looking at him, and the familiar way he looked back, made me feel queasy.

It also made me aware that he was not one of us, not bound in the way we were. More importantly, it made me realize that if a person like him could come and go as he pleased, then so could someone like me.

My mother must have seen that. My mother, who'd waited thirty-three years before leaving the home of her father, must have known that for a fifteen-year-old girl coming into the age of wanting independence, Shirley Hillman was right there to serve as a prime example of what freedom might be. And to a middle-aged man feeling trapped by lonely years on a scrub farm, Shirley's life must have seemed a beacon of adventure.

I never remember either of my parents complaining about the Depression or hard times, and although things were certainly not always easy, we never took a handout. My mother's pride would never have allowed that. One day at my school, the teacher announced that a government truck would be distributing free oranges on a certain Saturday. All you had to do was join the line and fill your bag. The kids all started screaming and clapping, just as if a circus were coming to town, only better. It had been a good long while since any of our families had tasted an orange.

"Katherine," Mother said, "those oranges are for people who can't do any better. We still have canned pears left from last summer and it's going to be such a pretty day tomorrow, I was hoping

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you could walk over to Tennybrook Stream and catch us some fish for Saturday dinner."

Mother had been doing that for years: getting what she wanted while covering the fact that the rest of us didn't. Usually I'd just go along, but that was my fifteenth summer. I was beginning to think about the world and, in general, agreeableness seemed to be disagreeable. I wanted my share of those oranges and I said so.

"This isn't just about oranges, Katherine. It's an attitude about life. Any honest person living in these parts who needs food can always find an honest way to get it." And there was Shirley Hillman again, because we both knew that Shirley would be there, baby as well, gathering up her share of free oranges.

When I came to this nursing home, I was told to bring one chest for storage and one chair for sitting. The chest is where I'm expected to store my life's possessions, but I've found that the chair is what allows me to possess my life. I brought my father's high-backed oak rocker. Some afternoons when the sun shines full through the open side window, I can drift into half-sleep alone there and feel I'm floating back on the slow autumn currents of Tennybrook Stream.

I often got us fish for dinner, especially in the spring when the brookies would be running, so gullible then, they'd be jumping the rocks and riffling up the water until it seemed they could be dipped out with a pail. Sometimes I hated to take them, they'd come that close. It was almost like having a friend.

Father taught me to fish. After I got to be nine or ten, he began taking me with him along the dirt meadow road, past the house that would later be Shirley's. We would cut through the steep swale meadow that dropped off on the other side, on down to where the stream sluiced perilously close to the railroad tracks in spring. Both of us loved those places where the water shot channels through sharp rocks and drowned trees, moving over the sponge moss that looked solid but could suck a shoe into ankle-deep water. He taught me to look carefully along the bank for a still-water run where trout and smallmouth bass might be found cooling beneath the undercut banks.

I don't remember my father and me ever talking much. He liked to whistle softly while he fished and I would sometimes hum along. The fishing times were good times, times when he seemed to feel easy with me. I remember catching a really big trout once, copper-colored and skin specked with blots the color of pooled blood. I knew right away that it was going to be big. It pulled against me in bursts, spasms spaced regular as a heartbeat, but by then I'd learned how to use the stream, working the fish against the current until the fight had gone. Father had to help me pull it in—anything over a pound could snap the line—and

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when it was safe, Father didn't say a word but he grinned and I could tell that he was proud. I think he loved me. And then later, when he fell asleep, I felt that he trusted me as well.

I don't think I ever really knew the man who was my father. I don't even know exactly where he came from, except that it was somewhere in Ohio. I heard once that he was a bit of a hell-raiser in his early twenties, but I suppose Mother brought him to reason on that. The only one of his family I ever met was a brother who came for a dinner and one night's sleep and left the next day at sunrise.

I have two surviving photographs of my mother, and in both of them she is carefully posed, tight and controlled, looking the way she thought of herself. But my father? No pictures remain. He seems too much to be just the man who was married to my mother. Thinking of him, I get more impressions than specifics. The only clear memory I have of him seems to be of a time when he slept while I fished: head propped against a rock, legs awkward and loose, one knee half raised against a fallen tree. I wonder now if I'm not confusing him with the boy at Shirley's house, because in my memory he looks young and free enough to have been that boy's friend, and I had a sudden vision of him and that boy hitting the road together, laughing, maybe drinking and bragging about girls.

I was never sure what Father thought about Shirley Hillman. The land he farmed happened to be crescent-shaped and her house sat back in the curve of that form so that he had to pass her place regularly when he worked. Since she was usually outside, they must have nodded occasionally or said hello. She was always friendly. Thinking through it, I remember that once he spent a few days repairing the fences that ran behind her property. I don't know why; he had no particular need for those fences. Maybe it was just something Shirley asked him to do. She most likely would have thanked him or offered him water from the pump out back. Maybe she gave him an orange.

I remember Mother talking a great deal at that time about how the fruit trees were beginning to ripen in our side yard, the side that faced onto Shirley's house. Ordinarily, Mother never checked those trees, but they were her way of letting Father know she knew he was up there by Shirley's and that she was watching. She must have talked about apples and pears for two weeks solid.

Once when some drifter had been staying at Shirley's for more than a week, I remember walking up the hill from home and I saw that my father was coming from the other direction. When we passed, almost directly in front of her house, he walked not ten feet away from me but his face was turned and he didn't even see me. When Shirley called hello, I was the only one who waved. That

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might have made me think his feelings were the same as Mother's, but then a few days later I saw him leave two fresh-caught bass on Shirley's back stoop.

I suppose memory, like a moving stream, can be looked into as many ways as there are people looking. The very young days when my father first began to take me fishing, I would gaze into the rippling water and see waves or bubbles, sunlight flattening along a fallen twig or the splash of bright water off a shifting rock. With time, he taught me to see better. Where I looked and saw the bright rock and moved on, he would continue looking, waiting to see the trout or smallmouth bass that lay beside the rock, the force that caused the rock to move.

That is how my memory works the days I'm really in its rhythm, when I can slow not the stream of consciousness passing, but my own ability to look at it. Then, although the flow continues, slow in some places and faster in others, jumping the fallen branches and diving into the undercut banks, I remain still and instead of fighting the current I let it wash over and around me and if I catch something today, that's good. If I don't, well then I've learned to enjoy the process and maybe tomorrow my net will be faster and I'll come back with enough for three days' thoughtful grazing.

The day Shirley was killed, I don't remember the three of us even talking about it. I must have tried to, must have tried to find out what happened, but of course there was Mother's rule about no unpleasant topics at dinner. I've been trying to remember that night. Trying to place Mother there at the table. I do remember my father and the way his eyes looked in the light of the candles, wide and fearful and angry. I guess we all felt that way. Unsure, probably, and scared that something so threatening could happen that close-by. I've been trying to see Mother as well, but when I try to look into her face, her eyes are always averted, not down, but aside or into the distance and I cannot tell if they show fear or distress or any of the emotions I suppose we all felt at the time.

A week or so later, when things had gotten back to normal, I decided to see if the fish were still biting, although it was late for the season. The grasses on both sides of the dirt meadow road had begun to batten down under the weather with only a few shoots of bone-white buckwheat still stiff above the matting.

Going past Shirley Hillman's house, I stopped to look in the window. I'm not sure what I expected to find, something gruesome, I guess. Blood or her old clothes, a toy of the child's. It wasn't really such an awful little house. It had three rooms and a wooden floor and I thought it looked pretty clean. I went in through the back that day, through the kitchen with its thin strip of gray linoleum under the table, and I thought about Shirley and the child and that boy eating there together.

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I'd already heard at school that she was found in the bedroom, lying on the floor. After the kitchen I went into the bedroom. There was just a narrow bed and a broken old bureau, which was empty. But I sat down there, on the floor, and thought about what it must have been like to be Shirley Hillman, living the way she did, dying so young and having a child and all. I wondered then whether she'd been found on her stomach or her back. I knew she'd been flattened across the back of her head, so it seemed most likely she died on her stomach. I rolled over, sort of scrunched up there on the cold floor, but I still couldn't feel what it would have been like to be Shirley.

The floor under the bed was not very clean. Whoever had gone in there to straighten after the murder couldn't have taken much bother. That didn't seem right to me, as though times were so bad that this woman's life didn't matter much to anyone, and when I saw the mess left behind, I began to get angry. After I'd brushed the dust and leavings there into a pile, I gathered it into my clean handkerchief and took it outside with me to get my fishing gear.

I caught no fish that day, but I hadn't expected to. Half the time I spent at Tennybrook Stream was really just to dream. I liked to throw things into the water, to see what could float, and if something did, I liked to think about it bubbling all the way down Tennybrook to where the stream ran into the river and from there on down to St. Louis, home free.

There hadn't been any service for Shirley Hillman so I decided to have one myself. I mumbled that stuff from the Bible about dust to dust and then, holding my handkerchief high over Tennybrook Stream, I shook out the remains from Shirley's house. The heavier bits sank immediately but the congealed flakes of blue ironing wax darted over the stones as though escaping. I bet if anything ever made it to St. Louis, they did. ●

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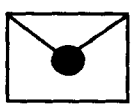

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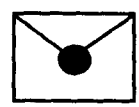

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The Ultimate Terminal?

by Cornelia Snider Yarrington

In Charlotte once I passed the gate
and headed for the carousel,
where I was forced to contemplate
a universe quite parallel.

A restless crowd there met my eyes
in puffy down coats just like mine,
like bloated pigeons plopped from skies
into the swamp of Southern time.

In and out the claw belt creaked
through flaps that belched their emptiness.
No matter how we craned and peeked,
the serpent back lay luggageless.

Like cat clocks, eyes clicked left and right
along the endless coiling track
that hot, supernal winter night
in search of some familiar pack.

And still the belt curled in and out
and brought no single bag to view.
A lightless dream in total drought
except for one lone bachelor shoe.

In and out of hidden nooks
it rolled, this errand, nowhere bound.
Postcards, pocket paperbacks
or prizes dearer, less profound.

The devil's workshop of my mind,
forced to idle in the wait,
watched this dress shoe twist and wind
through visions of its owner's fate.

No Cinderella in a suit
hopped up for what was not afoot.
Would he conference in one Oxxis boot?
A sock soiled black by sidewalk soot?

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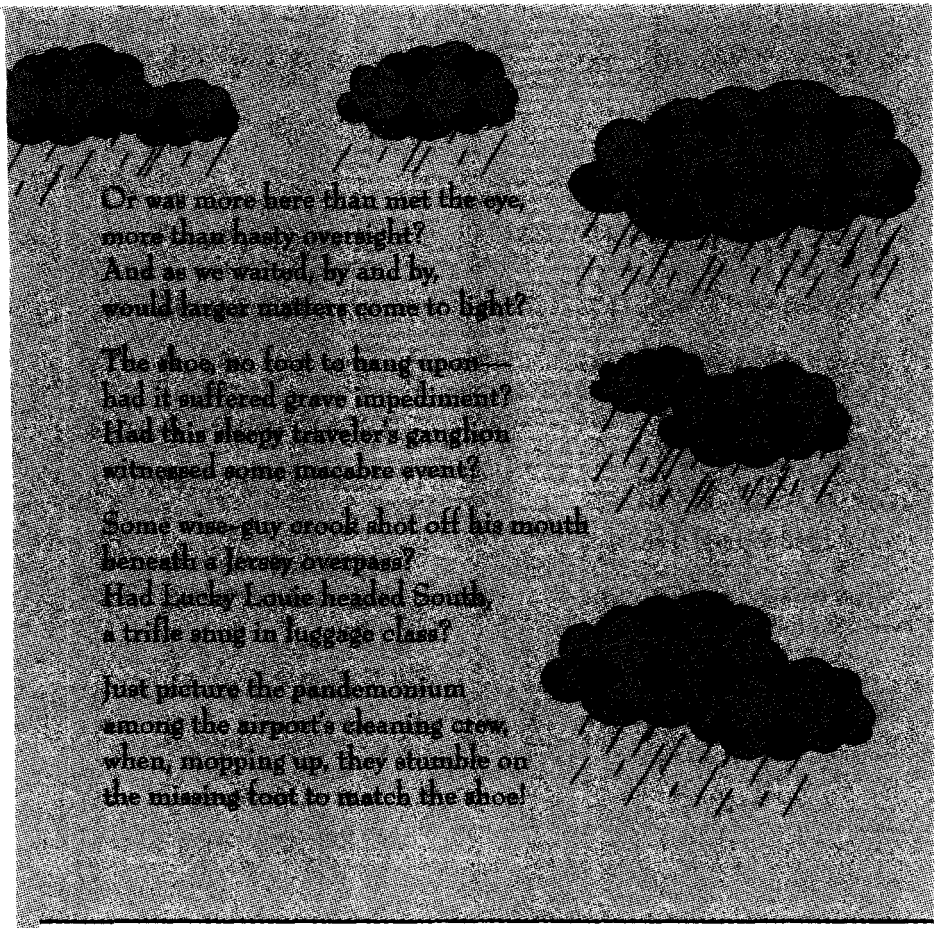
Or was more here than met the eye,
more than hasty overnight?
And as we waited, by and by,
would larger matters come to light?
The shoe, no foot to bang upon—
had it suffered grave impediment?
Had this sleepy traveler's gangbon
witnessed some macabre event?
Some wise-guy crook shot off his mouth
beneath a Jersey overpass?
Had Lucky Louie headed South,
a trifle stung in luggage class?
Just picture the pandemonium
among the airport's cleaning crew,
when, mopping up, they stumble on
the missing foot to match the shoe!

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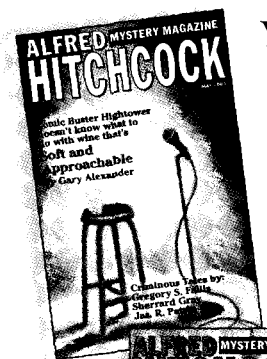

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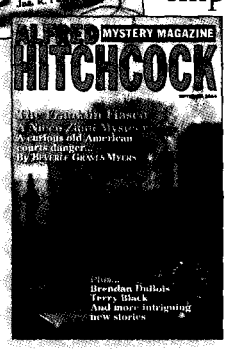

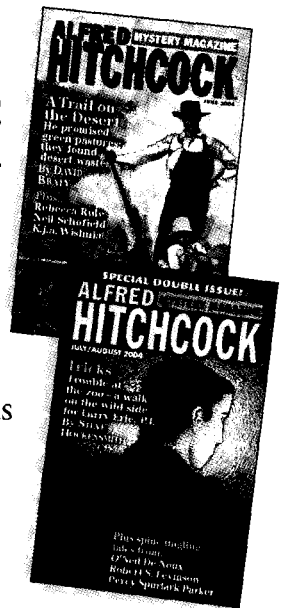

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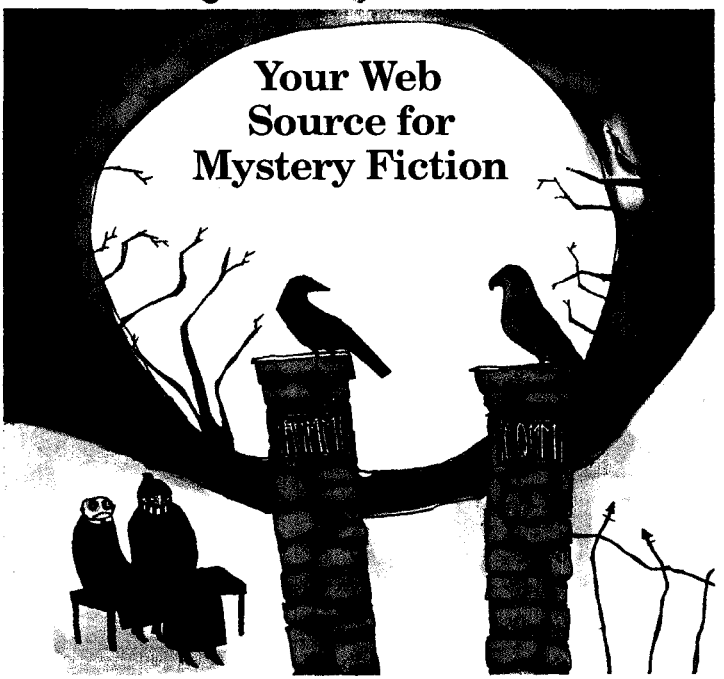

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